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A Novel

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

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A Novelet

By W. C. TUTTLE

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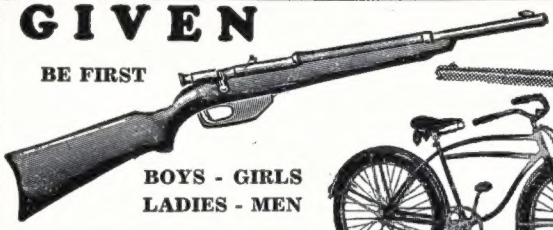

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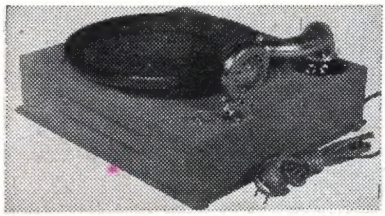

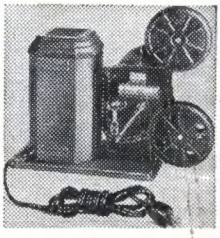

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Giant Western

VOL. 2, No. 2 FALL, 1948 Price 25c

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When bred-in-the-bone cattleman Ron Davis suddenly inherits a sheep ranch, it's the signal for a new flare-up of roaring war—and human sidewinders add fresh fuel to the fires of hate ablaze on the range!

A Complete Novelet

SKEETER BILL COMES TO TOWN . . . . W. C. TUTTLE 100

This salty seven-footer heads for Yellow Butte to celebrate a kid's birthday — and does some plumb fast shooting while traveling there!

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An exciting true story of the Llano Estacado in buffalo-hunting days

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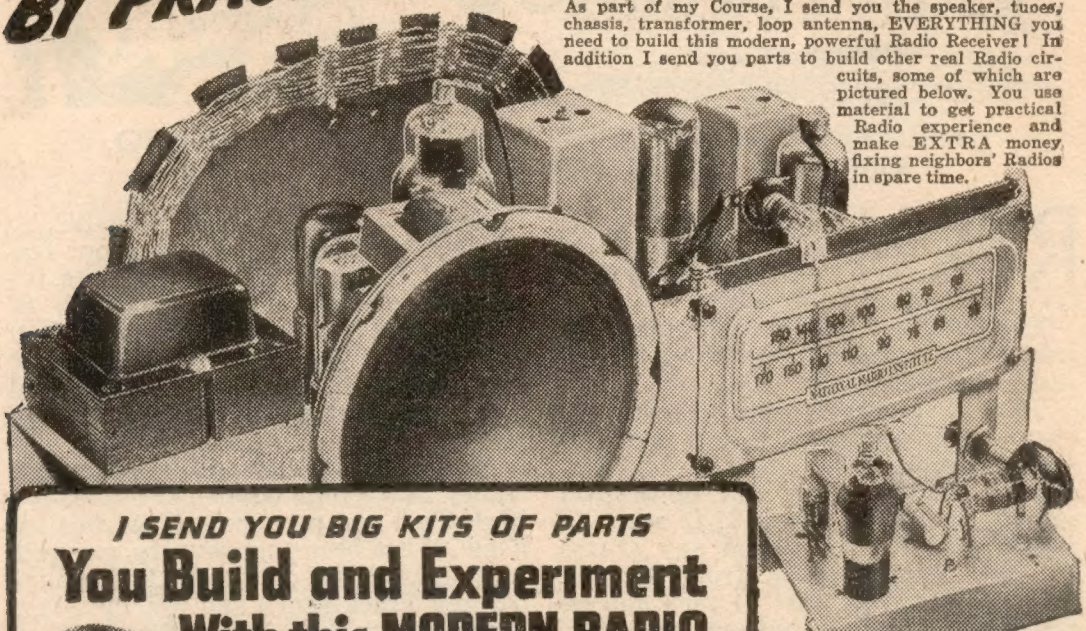

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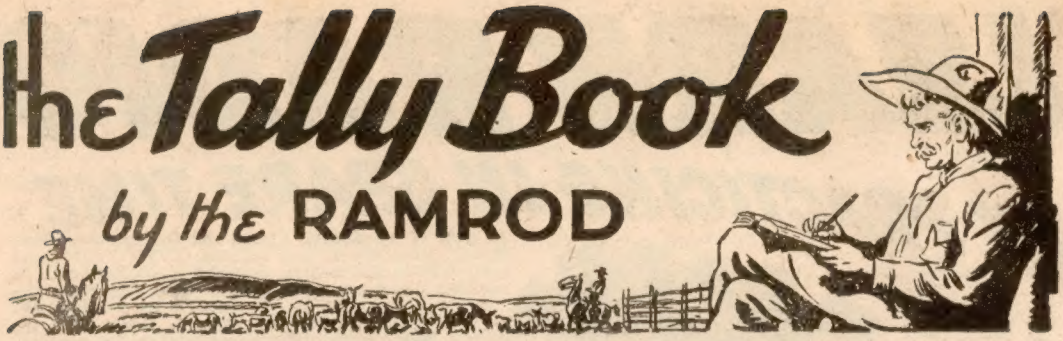
The Tally Book

by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

READING the history of our old Wild West makes a fellow sort of fall back on that old bromide that truth is stranger than fiction.

The old West took a back seat to no part of the world when it came to fantastic events!

Take the career of Billy The Kid, for example. Ask yourself how it was possible for a customer who was just asking for trouble all the time, as the Kid was, to live to the age of 21 in a region where men hardly needed any excuse to start hauling guns from leather! The Kid killed at least 21 men and he pulled some escapes that are incredible. Surrounded by armed men, all shooting at him, the Kid often dashed straight through his attackers, shooting a few en route, and got away clean without being touched.

Amazing Marksmanship

Partly that was due to the Kid's amazing marksmanship with a hand gun. But you can bet your bottom dollar that most of it was due to the Kid's even more amazing reputation; that his enemies were so nervous they couldn't see or aim straight.

This reputation was the Kid's greatest asset and when it failed him, as it did when he ran up against Pat Garret, who wasn't afraid of him, it was finis for the Kid.

Any time you get to thinking that maybe the stories of the West are a little exaggerated, cast an eye over the short fact pieces scattered through the pages of GIANT WESTERN, or leaf back through Fred Bechdolt's fine historical series now running and see if the truth pulls any punches compared with fiction.

Take a story like HIGH DESERT, by Wayne D. Overholser, which is our featured novel for the next issue. Sure, it's brimful of action and the clash of strong men meeting in fierce combat. But I think your first reaction to the story will be the feeling that it's so real and honest that it could easily have happened.

Murdo Morgan came back to Paradise Valley in the high Oregon desert with a high ideal and a purpose. This was his home. It had been poor country, parched, half-starved, and dominated by the huge Turkey Track ranch and the legendary figure of its boss, Broad Clancy.

As a boy, Morgan had dreamed of stomping Clancy under his bootheels, of smashing the Turkey Track's hold on Paradise Valley. But this was no boy's dream of revenge he had now, this was a greater thing, in which the breaking of Turkey Track's stranglehold was only a part.

Morgan had floated a loan and bought up the valley. He was back in it now to build a dam for irrigation, to build roads, and to lay out and sell sections for farming and ranching.

One Acre—One Fight

There was a catch to it. The catch was that Turkey Track, while it did not own a foot of this land, had always used it for grazing and considered it belonging to the ranch by divine right. Broad Clancy would not give up an acre without a fight.

There were other complications. There was Peg Royce, tempestuous daughter of a squatter, who wanted Morgan and made no pretense of hiding her feelings. There was Buck Carrick

(Continued on page 174)

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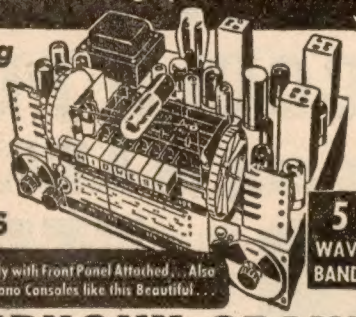

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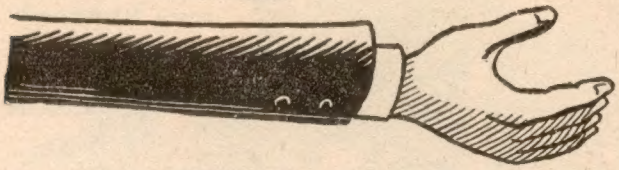

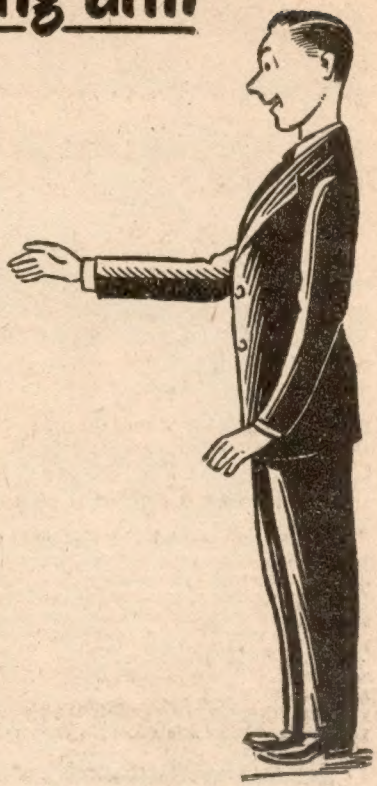

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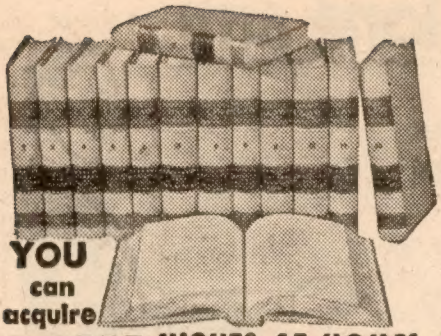

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The HIDE-OUT GUN

—and where it was hidden!

by JOHN BLACK

NOT all western gunmen carried their armament in the traditional belt holster. There were crafty ones who sought to mislead an enemy by appearing unarmed, the while they packed a weapon in such unorthodox places as up a sleeve, in a boot, or hanging by a string around the neck. Doc Holliday, the homicidal gambler of Tucson fame, wore a sawed-off shot-gun suspended from a string around his neck and concealed the whole business with a loose coat or linen duster.

The simplest type of hide-out rig was the shoulder holster which could accommodate anything from a full-sized .45 to a derringer. This might be a conventional enough holster of leather, or might be trimmed down to nothing more than a pair of spring clips from which the gun could be plucked.

Some gunmen spurned holsters of any kind. Wild Bill Hickok is said to have used a holster almost never, merely shoving a pair of pistols into the waistband of his trousers.

Perhaps the most deadly of all hide-out devices was the sleeve arrangement for a hidden derringer. The gun, though so small it could be swallowed up in a man's hand, packed a colossal punch. It was usually double-barreled and took a .41 or .45 slug which was soft-nosed and had a tendency to spread after entering the vital parts of a target. The result was that one of these derringer slugs, fired at ten feet or so, opened up a hole in a man through which a herd of cattle could be driven and gave the doctor little chance to exercise his skill.

The little gun could be held up a man's sleeve by a length of elastic which would be cuffed to the wrist. A sharp downward jerk of the forearm would flip the gun forward into the user's palm and the unexpectedness of the move would often give him a moment's advantage over his adversary. And it is that vital extra moment that every gunman was after, that made all the difference between life and death.

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a nonprofit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

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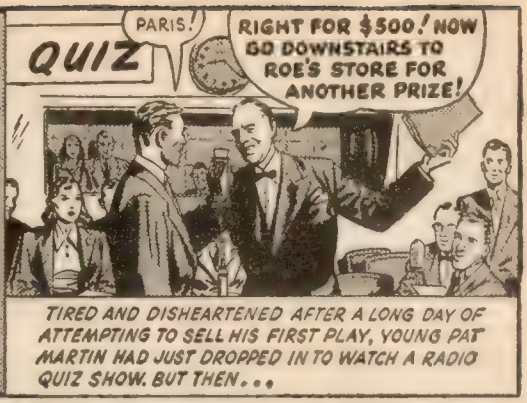
The ROSICRUCIANS
[AMORC]
San Jose California

THINGS BROKE RIGHT FOR PAT WHEN...



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TELL OUR AUDIENCE YOUR PLANS, PAT
WELL, DINNER, THEN A GOOD SHOW AND THEN A NIGHT CLUB, IF THE LADY'S WILLING
WHAT A CHANGE! HE'S HANDSOME!

IF MY BROTHER LIKES YOUR PLAY, IT'S AS GOOD AS SOLD. HE'S THE BEST AGENT IN TOWN
GREAT! THEN I'LL CALL FOR YOU TOMORROW AT THE STUDIO
SHE'S TERRIFIC!
AFTER THE SHOW

YOU ALWAYS GET SMOOTH, PLEASANT SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK AND FEEL SWELL WITH THIN GILLETTES...THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO YOU AVOID THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES WHEN YOU USE THIN GILLETTES IN YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR. THEY ARE PRECISION-MADE TO FIT EXACTLY. ENJOY TRUE SHAVING COMFORT WITH THIN GILLETTES
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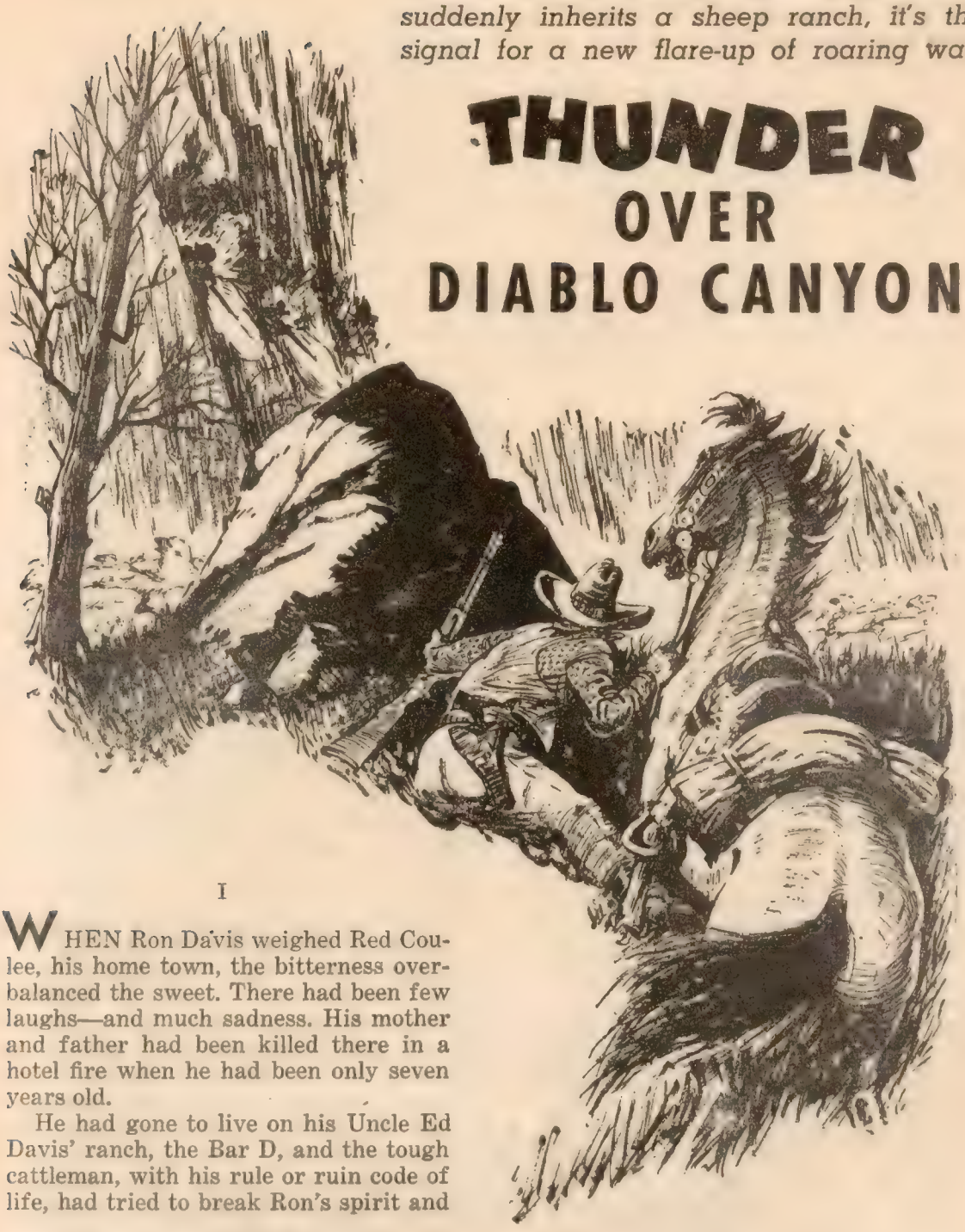
THUNDER OVER DIABLO CANYON



I

WHEN Ron Davis weighed Red Coulee, his home town, the bitterness overbalanced the sweet. There had been few laughs—and much sadness. His mother and father had been killed there in a hotel fire when he had been only seven years old.

He had gone to live on his Uncle Ed Davis' ranch, the Bar D, and the tough cattleman, with his rule or ruin code of life, had tried to break Ron's spirit and

a novel by

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

mold him into his idea of what a boy and man should be.

Even now, as the train hurried Ron to the reading of his Uncle Ed's will, he admitted that he had never really figured out the man. There had been stormy scenes at the big ranchhouse when the man's iron will had clashed with the boy's high spirits.

"I'm tryin' to make somethin' out of you," Ed Davis would bellow, "and you buck me at every turn! I got five nephews, and there ain't one of 'em worth a hoot. Get off'n the ranch, Ron, and stay off!"

Then Ron would walk the nine miles to town and get a job. Sometimes it would be in the livery stable. Again he would wash dishes and do the swamping at the Pearl Cafe. Often Nixon's General Store had needed a boy. Nixon was a slave driver who would work a kid until he was sick, then insist that the younger generation had gone soft. He would usually say, "When I was a boy, we worked. I'd get up at three, four in the morning and start in. Nine o'clock was bedtime. The rest of the time I had to get in and dig except a half hour for meals. But it got me somewhere—it got me somewhere."

The boyhood job that Ron had detested most was the year he had spent on Slagg's sheep ranch. It had been work with sheep or starve. Even at fifteen Ron had had the cattleman's contempt for sheep and all those who worked with them.

"I wouldn't be caught dead here," he had repeatedly told himself, "but I've got to live and prove to Uncle Ed that I'll amount to something."

After Ron had been away from Bar D anywhere from a month to a year his Uncle Ed would send for him. There would be no suggestion that he was relenting. Rather it had seemed to be a new determination to break the boy's spirit. Ed Davis had boasted, with considerable truth, that no man had ever beaten him, so he couldn't accept defeat from a boy.

As the train neared Red Coulee, the high points of Ron's youth came back. At twenty-one he had left Red Coulee on a Chicago-bound cattle train, with five dollars in his pocket. Now he was returning with a silver-mounted saddle, a thousand dollars, and a growing reputation as a rodeo rider.

WHEN Ron stepped onto the platform no one said, "Ron, where'd you come from? Where you been?" Everyone acted as if he had been gone no longer than twenty-four hours.

He left the saddle and his bag at Johnson's Livery Stable, then went over to Abner Webb's office. The grim range lawyer had handled his uncle's legal affairs for years.

"Glad to see you back," Webb said, as he shook hands. "The cousins are here. None of 'em ever drifted too far away, Ron. You know how they are—each afraid the other will put over something when his back is turned."

"And each expecting to inherit the Bar D," Ron added. "Well, I've nothing like that on my mind."

Webb's expression didn't change, but he said, "It's the dangedest will I ever drew up. And it can't be broken either."

"When did they have the funeral?"

"Last week. You knew all about your uncle's tragic ending, of course?"

"I don't know anything except that I got a telegram from you inviting me to be present when the will is read," Ron answered.

The lawyer shook his head sadly. "You recall the Quail Creek cabin, Ron?"

Ron remembered it well. A hunter's paradise in a small way. The ridges and benches were alive with quail; the stream—icy the year around—was filled with fighting trout. The stream emptied into a small lake surrounded by a swamp—the nesting ground of fast-flying teal ducks. It was his uncle's favorite spot when he needed relaxation.

"Your uncle went out for a weekend," the lawyer said, "and several days

later a passing cowpuncher noticed dead leaves on live trees. He rode down and found ashes. Even the heavy logs had burned, leaving charred ends. The heat had killed the leaves on the trees surrounding the cabin. It must have been a hot fire. A few bones were all that remained."

"Killed?"

"Apparently not, though he was a man with a mind of his own, and such men make enemies," Webb said. "His

Ron Davis

old silver watch, the one that wound with a key, was melted. A dentist identified his upper plate. The ashes were sifted, but nothing suggesting a bullet was found. . . . The will is to be read at the ranch, Ron. That is one of the provisions."

"I might as well ride out," Ron said.

He hired a horse at the livery stable and raised its morale by putting on the silver-mounted saddle. Ron Davis was not a show-off, but he wanted to see the greed and envy come into Jed Davis' eyes.

Of the cousins, Jed, tall, lean and dour was the most greedy. He had fawned around his uncle, agreed to everything he said, and planted seeds of suspicion with regard to the others. He reminded Ron of a well-greased snake. Jed's brother, Hank, was a hulk of a man and slow of movement. He thought things through coldly, and without emotion. He planned, and Jed executed. They were always together, even in crowds, and Hank's ear seemed forever leaning toward Jed's lips.

The seven remaining cousins were of different types—dull, dangerous, lazy, indifferent. Because Ron had always been at outs with old Ed Davis, the others did not regard him as a probable heir and were friendly enough. But it was not the sort of friendship Ron welcomed.

On his way to the Bar D, from force of habit Ron's eyes turned toward the Ballard ranch. He noticed that the fences needed repairing, and weeds were threatening to spread over the grazing land. Only a few fine, spirited thoroughbred horses dotted the Ballard range. He stopped once and critically inspected three horses.

"I've seen better broomtails," he thought. "The Ballards are slipping."

He didn't feel elated. Major Ballard had been well liked, but his wife from the East considered cattle raisers several cuts beneath her. She was "stuck-up," the cowpunchers said. And her daughter, Betty, was on the way to becoming a first class snob.

At seven, Ron had thought Betty Ballard the prettiest thing he had ever looked at. He was still of the same opinion when Betty was eleven—an age when girls should be put into an attic with the old trunks and discarded furniture.

HE HADN'T seen her in three years because her mother had packed her off to the exclusive girls' school that she herself had attended. Mrs. Ballard was confident the school would remove any small remaining range roughness,

and perhaps be the means of Betty's meeting a man of her own "class." Preferably one whose money didn't come from cattle, horses or sheep. Banking and finance would be about right, Mrs. Ballard thought.

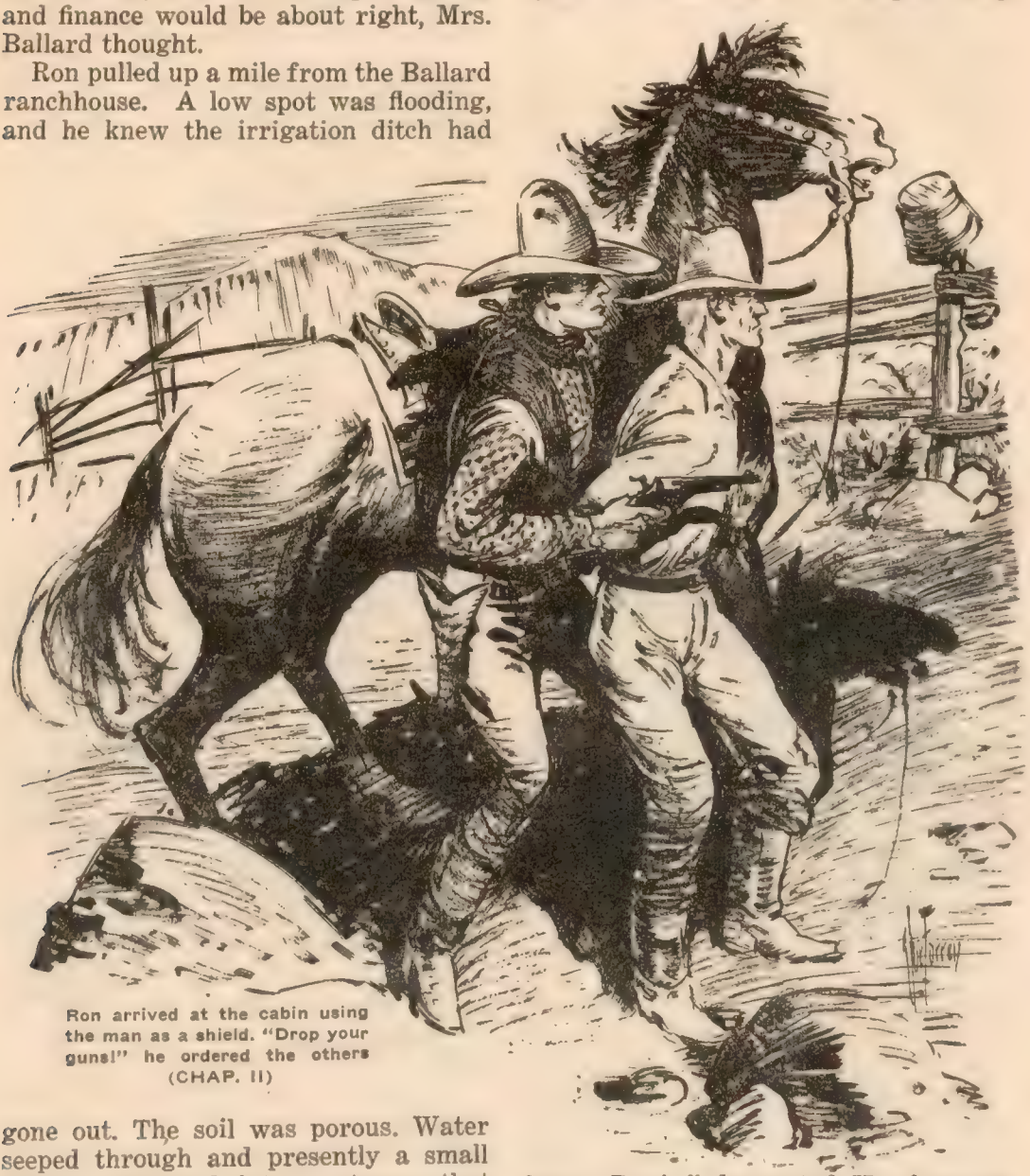
Ron pulled up a mile from the Ballard ranchhouse. A low spot was flooding, and he knew the irrigation ditch had gone out. The soil was porous. Water seeped through and presently a small spring developed into a stream that eventually would tear out the side of the ditch.

Ron crossed the ditch on a rotting plank and looked down on a white-haired woman holding a grain sack open.

A slender, dark girl was shoveling dirt into the sack. Ron swore softly.

"Betty Ballard and her mother! I never thought I'd see anything like this." He pulled off his hat and said, "Hello! Need a hand?"

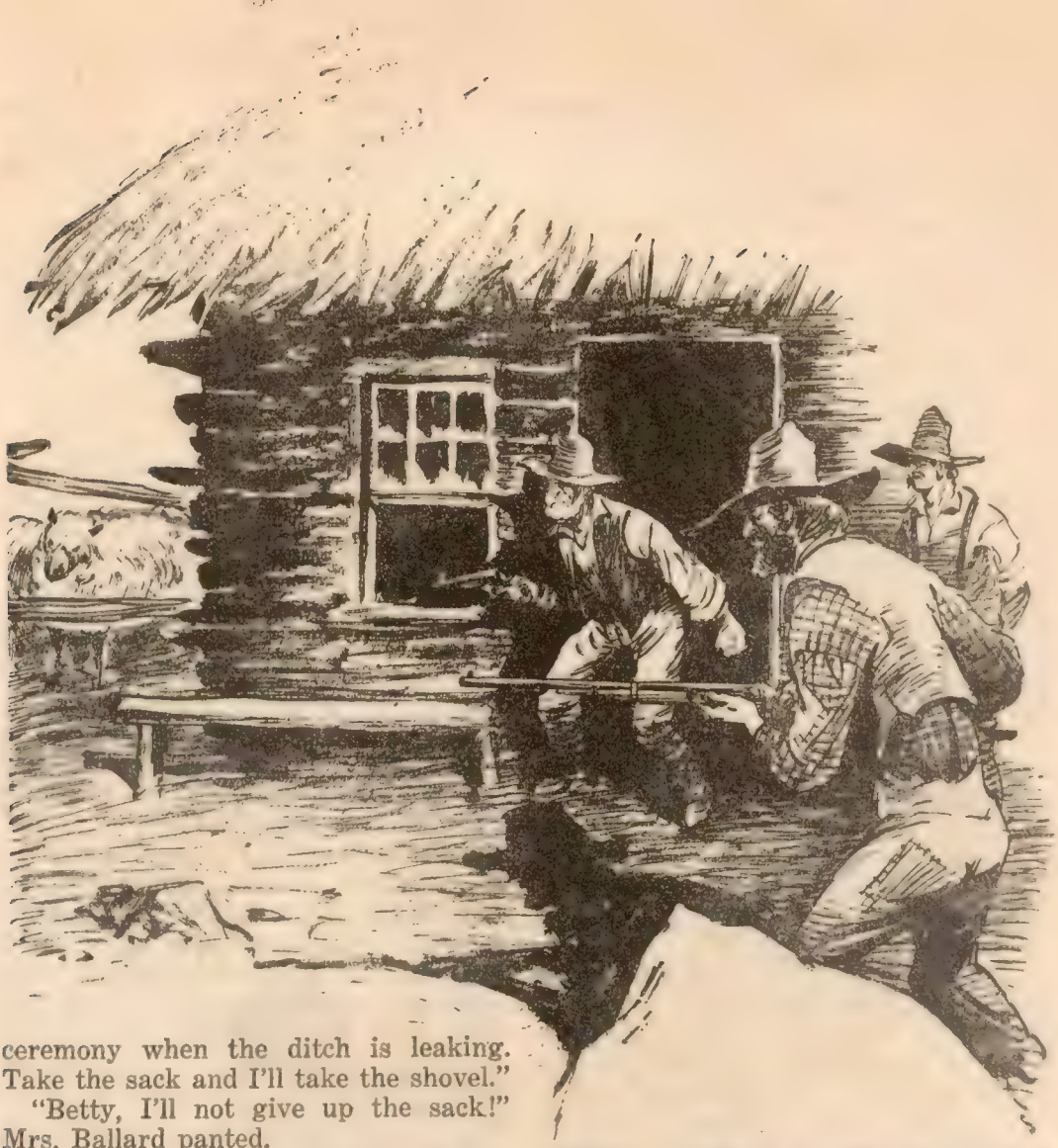
Mrs. Ballard looked up with flashing eyes. "I'd die before I accepted help from a Davis," she panted. Her face was so flushed that Don wondered if her heart could stand her indignation.



Ron arrived at the cabin using the man as a shield. "Drop your guns!" he ordered the others (CHAP. II)

"Won't you please go?" the girl said. "You should know we don't want anything to do with you."

"It's news to me," Ron said. "I've been away from the rest of the Davis tribe for a couple of years now. But as far as going . . ." He shook his head. "The answer is no. We can't stand on



ceremony when the ditch is leaking. Take the sack and I'll take the shovel."

"Betty, I'll not give up the sack!" Mrs. Ballard panted.

Ron picked up an empty sack and tossed it at the girl.

"Hold it! This is the time for horse sense. And that's one thing the Ballards should have. You've raised some of the best."

He began shoveling in dirt. When the sack was full he dropped it into the soft bank and jumped on it until it disappeared into the ooze.

This went on for an hour, with Ron working furiously. For a while it was touch and go, then the leak stopped. The girl licked her lips, intense dislike struggling with good manners. The latter won.

"Thank you," she said. He noticed that big water blisters were forming on her hands.

"Don't mention it," Ron answered. "There are times on the range when people should pull together. They don't have to put their arms around each other and sing 'Sweet Adeline,' but they must pull."

As he climbed the bank he instinctively looked back—and hastily ducked. Mrs. Ballard had hurled a rock at his head. Her face was purple.

"I'll be hanged," Ron muttered. "What's happened since I've been away? The Davis tribe always was dirt under the Ballard's feet, but they were never so undignified as to fight with us."

He saw tragedy in Mrs. Ballard's proud face. . . .

The Bar D, in contrast to the Ballard's Box B, was in fine shape. The fences were in repair, the machinery

looked new, and the barns were painted. The beef cattle strain Ron's uncle had created now predominated.

"They sure do run to big steaks and roasts," Ron mused as he rode into the winding lane leading to the ranchhouse which also had been recently painted.

It all gave Ron an odd feeling. It looked as if his uncle, expecting death, had left everything in order. Ron could almost hear him saying, "It'll take those worthless nephews of mine some time to let that ranch run down."

He put up his horse in the nearest barn, and walked to the house, entering through the back door. Ah Fong, the Chinese cook, greeted him. He was very old, had once been toothless, but had acquired plates which gave him a beaver's profile.

"You're looking fine, Fong," Ron said. "That's a grand set of choppers you've got."

"Cost hundred dollar," Fong answered. He was a practical soul, and saved against the day when death would overtake him. Then his remains were to be shipped to China.

Ron went to the living room where his cousins were sitting around, smoking. They exchanged greetings. They told him that he was looking fine, and he agreed that they were in the pink of condition, knowing that no one cared a hoot about anything except Uncle Ed Davis' will. He excepted himself.

"Think I'll have a look at that silver mounted saddle, Ron," Jed Davis said.

RON followed him to the barn and saw the greed in Jed's eyes, as he had expected. Jed's long fingers touched the silver mountings. "Some folks have all the luck," he said.

"I had plenty of luck," Ron admitted, and added, "But a little riding went along with it. Hard riding that included a lot of bad falls." He broke off, remembering that Jed gave no man credit for hard work. It was all luck. "Webb will be out tomorrow," he said. "I'll drift the day after."

"Where are you going?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Ron answered. "I'm twenty-three and my education isn't finished. Some of these days I'll spot the big chance and I'll want to be ready."

That evening, as they sat around the table talking, Ron realized how little in common he had with his cousins. They spent their lives under someone else's plum tree waiting for the fruit to fall. Ron was trying to find a spot to plant a tree of his own, and money to buy the tree.

He knew the cattle raiser's problems, but six months in a Chicago packing plant had also taught him the packer's problems. He had put in another six months as assistant trainer with a man who owned a string of race horses. Ron had a hunch he would keep on drifting until some girl threw a loop over his head.

The following morning Abner Webb read Uncle Ed's will.

" 'Well here you are, all gathered about to see what falls when Death shakes the tree,' " the lawyer read. " 'If my ghost is in the room it will see Greedy Jed and Plotting Hank speculating on how to outfox their more fortunate cousins—if there are more fortunate cousins. I can imagine Hank telling himself that I am crazy and that the will can be broken. You're wrong, Hank. About now, Hank, you're a trifle red in the face. Then there are the others, well-meaning young fellows, but with no drive, wondering what the rich uncle has left them.' "

Webb stopped reading and looked up. "A strange will," he said, "but the most interesting I have ever drawn."

"Go on with the reading," Jed growled.

" 'At this point I directed Abner Webb to make a comment, knowing Jed's annoyance,' " Webb read on. " 'And you, Jed, were annoyed. And *are* annoyed. One man is quietly amused over all this—Ron Davis, the lone wolf. Ron will be here if it's humanly possible. Ron has a great sense of family loyalty. Stubborn as a mule, too. I never could make anything of him. He is the best bet of the lot of you. Now, Ron, they're all glaring at you. They hate the truth. I won't keep you in suspense any

longer, Jed. To my beloved nephew, Jed Davis, I give and bequeath the Red Coulee Brick Company, provided he works a year, side by side with his day laborers. Jed needs the common man touch.' "

"The man was mad!" Jed snarled. "I didn't know he owned the brick yard."

"That's the way it is," Webb said. "You can take it or leave it. It is out of my hands." He resumed, " 'To my beloved nephew, Henry Davis, I give and bequeath the Sunny Slope Gold Mining Company. If he can scheme and plot that into a paying proposition he deserves a monument.' "

"How long has he owned that?" Hank growled.

"As I recall," Webb answered, "he bought it in order to bequeath it to you." He continued. " 'To my beloved nephew, Ronald Davis, who hates sheep to the point that he wouldn't play "Run Sheep Run" with the kids at school, I give and bequeath the Diablo Canyon Sheep Company. . . . Look at Ron, he's either blown his top or he's grinning.' "

Ron was grinning. "What a time Uncle Ed is having wherever he is. Mr. Webb, have you any idea what that sheep ranch is worth?"

"Seventy-five thousand dollars," Webb answered, "but you can't sell it. You've got to operate it—make it return ten per cent dividend above operating expenses. That figures seventy-five hundred dollars. We'll go into that later."

THE lawyer resumed reading the will. No one had been left out, but each had been given a tough proposition to solve. If he solved it, then, properly managed, there was a good living in the business.

"Who gets the Bar D?" Jed asked, when Webb stopped reading.

"That is held in trust. I'm one of the trustees, the Red Coulee State Bank is another, and Porky Stetson, present manager of Bar D, is the third. Porky, by the way, is bequeathed twenty-five thousand dollars for long and faithful service."

"Porky," a mountain of a man who rode in buckboards because his weight was a cruel load for the average horse, smiled expansively. His attitude toward life was, "I ain't mad at nobody." But he could be tough, and no man knew more than he did about raising beef.

"I'm going to break the will," Jed announced. "How many of you will join me? The thing, in itself, proves that Uncle Ed was mentally unbalanced."

"Your Uncle Ed was two jumps ahead of you on that score," Webb said, with a touch of pride. "He was examined by a group of psychiatrists who pronounced him mentally sound. They gave me the impression that in their opinion he knew a lot about human nature. You see, gentlemen, with the exception of Ron, they looked you over."

II

LAWYER WEBB took Ron Davis aside to speak to him privately.

"Well, Ron," he asked, "what are you going to do?"

"Swallow my dislike of sheep, and operate the ranch," Ron asked. "The will said 'operate at a profit' I believe?"

"That's right," Webb admitted.

"Then as soon as I operate at a profit it is mine without strings attached?" Ron asked. "And I can sell the ranch, sheep and all, and put the money into a cattle proposition?"

"That's right," Webb agreed.

"As I get it," Ron said, "boiled down, each bequest will determine whether or not a cousin has the ability to manage a business."

"That's right," Webb repeated. "That's what convinced the psychiatrists that your uncle was mentally sound."

"No reasonable man would want greater proof," Ron agreed. "Now there's one thing more. When I rode past the Ballard's place the ditch was leaking. Betty and her mother were filling sacks. Naturally I offered to help. The air was filled with frost the instant they saw me. What's happened?"

Webb groaned. "Didn't anyone tell you? Ron, your uncle and Major Ballard had a run-in over some range land. Bal-

lard said some pretty rough things and your uncle threatened to kill him. We tried to cool off both men and thought we had. But when Ballard set out for the disputed ground—Blue Grass Valley—your uncle took after him, muttering threats. Ballard was found dead two days later."

"What was Uncle Ed's defense?"

"He admitted that he had left, threatening to kill Ballard, but had cooled off and gone over to his Quail Creek cabin to fish and forget the whole business—or think of some way to chase Ballard out of Blue Grass Valley. Two men testified that they saw your uncle a few miles from the cabin at the time Ballard was believed to have been killed."

"That should have been enough," Ron said.

"It wasn't, and it isn't now. The men have jail records, have lied and stolen cattle. Few people believed them, and the Ballards feel that your uncle killed the major and bribed those men to back up his alibi."

"What do Uncle Ed's friends think about it?"

"They believe he cooled off," Webb said. "That was like him. He might shoot a man in a sudden burst of rage, but he'd never do it hours later. He always cooled off."

"Yes," Ron agreed. "But he had a long memory. He never forgot that he couldn't make me over. Maybe I'd have been a better citizen if he had, but I'd not be the same man . . . I think I'll have a look at my ranch—cuss it."

"I hope you've plenty of rubber in your make-up, Ron," Webb said kindly. "You'll need it if you bounce back. Now don't ask me questions."

"Just one," Ron said. "The main part of the estate, Bar D, is held in trust. What or who benefits? Some institution?"

"Yes, a sort of institution that your uncle was interested in," Webb answered.

It wasn't a satisfactory answer, but Ron knew it would have to do. It would take a court action to make Webb specific on the point, and Ron wouldn't bother. . . .

Ron was familiar with the Diablo Canyon region in a general way, but since it was sheep country he had not ridden over it. He knew that the river cut through a fair-sized mountain range and that the lower slopes were heavy with grass. The trails left by the sheep as they zigzagged up the steeper slopes and fed, were visible for a considerable distance.

The sheepman who owned the flocks had had considerable trouble with cattlemen when he had tried to drive his sheep to market. Ron's Uncle Ed had stopped them one year. Ron hadn't been in on the ruckus, it being one of those periods when his uncle had kicked him out.

He bought a good horse from the Bar D and headed for his new property with full authority to take over. But he speculated a lot on what Webb had meant about his bouncing back.

It was a long day's ride and he decided to make it two days. This would give him a chance to size up the land in case he got into trouble later on. He knew both cattlemen and sheepmen carried chips on their shoulders.

IT WAS good cattle country, and became better when he rode into the sheep area. He saw the first flock at noon the next day. A lone herder sat on a rock. A couple of dogs lay at his feet. The sheep were bunched nearby. He waved and the herder looked up, but did not answer.

"Go to blazes!" Ron growled.

A half mile farther on, a bullet droned over his head. Another came closer as he whirled and galloped to the nearest cover. "The welcome mat isn't out," thought Ron. "Now what?"

He realized that he had cattleman written all over him.

"And what's more," he thought wrathfully, "I'm going to keep right on looking like a cattleman!"

He rode back to the lone sheepman.

"I guess I'm not wanted in this country," he said, ruefully.

He shoved his Stetson back and wiped the moisture from his brow. The sweat had put a curl in his black hair.

Suddenly he left the saddle headlong. His hands caught the sheepman's shoulders and dragged him to the ground. It was a typical steer bulldogger's trick and it drained all fight out of the sheepman. A hundred and eighty pounds had hit him like a ton of brick and Ron's hands had caught the man's wrists and were holding them tightly.

He forced his prisoner over to the horse and ordered him to mount. Ron got on behind the saddle and headed up the scratch on the range called a road. No more shots came from the thicket on the hillside. Ron galloped past the point, then slowed down. He knew his back presented a first rate target, but if a bullet struck him it would get his prisoner, too.

"Don't shoot—don't shoot!" the herder kept on bellowing.

"If he or anyone else shoots," Ron warned, "you'll go along with me. A fine thing—a sheepman and cattleman arriving at the Pearly Gates together."

"You'll find more sheepmen than cattlemen in the Bible!" the herder said, with surprising spirit.

Ron grinned. "First sheepman I ever met who had any fight in him," he said.

"You've just started meeting fighting sheepmen," the herder snapped. "How do you suppose we've lasted all these years if we couldn't hold our own?"

"I'm the new owner of Diablo Canyon Ranch," Ron said.

"Yeah," his captive said shortly, "I

"You little fool!" Ron yelled. "You'll drown yourself!" But Betty let the current take her into the fast water (CHAP. VI)

figgered it that way. Old Ed Davis put over a slick deal to get hold of Diablo sheep. The deal went through three, four parties. What'd he have against you?"

Ron did not answer, and soon they arrived at the cabin. Using the man as a shield, Ron faced two others.

"Drop your guns," he ordered.

"You might as well," Ron's prisoner said. "He's the new boss. He aims to drive the sheep off'n the range and bring in cattle."

"I aim to make a profit in sheep," Ron said.

"On the level?"

"On the level," Ron answered.

"We'll take your word for it," the prisoner said. "How about you taking our word that we'll string along with you?"

"Why not?" Ron said, and returned his gun to its holster.

The name of the man he had captured was Cal Lawrence. The others were called Sam and Mort. Tim, the herder who had taken a pot shot at Ron, came warily into camp.

Cal Lawrence, who seemed to be more or less in charge of the camp, showed Ron around. They put him up for the night in a bunk that was none too clean, but he had his own blanket roll.

The next morning he said, "There aren't as many sheep as I expected, Cal."

"You haven't seen the main ranch," Cal answered. "Come on down to the river."

He led the way down a winding trail to a raft.

"That raft don't look big enough to buck that white water," Ron observed. "A good smash would break it up."

"It'll do," Cal said.

They got aboard the raft, and Cal got on his knees and grabbed an oar that served as a sort of rudder. The current did the rest. White water drenched them. The raft banged into one wall, turned dizzily in spite of Cal's furious paddling, then struck the opposite wall.

"This is ten rodeos wrapped into one!" Ron yelled. "We're going through Diablo Canyon."

"Not all the way," Cal said. "We stop over at—"

HIS words were lost as a wave, tossed by a boulder, slapped him in the face. The next minute they went into an eddy and Ron saw a break in the canyon wall, and a small stream tumbling from a deep narrow valley. The eddy carried them around a couple of times, then Cal grounded the raft.

"Here is your real Diablo Canyon Ranch," he said. "A sheepherder's paradise. No chance of a flock going over a cliff, or getting lost. No varmints. The eagles are bad at lambing time, but we can handle that."

A well-beaten trail followed the creek for a quarter of a mile, then the valley widened. Grass grew luxuriously from the rich black loam.

"Any other place in the world," Cal said, "we'd overgraze if we ran this many sheep. This here is an old lake bottom. For hundreds of years loam from the upper valleys was washed down along with leaves, grass and what-not. The stuff settled to the bottom and rotted. Look up there and you can see the old water line."

The water line was five hundred feet above, but it was distinct enough on a cliff. There, too, were Indian carvings, made no doubt by men on rafts. Ron looked back. It was evident that an earthquake had cracked the wall between lake and canyon. He had an idea that water pressure had made short work of rocks and earth once it had an outlet.

"Who found this place?" he asked.

"The sheep," Cal said laconically. "Several years ago we had a dry spell. The range burned up. Remember it?"

"We shipped in hay by the carload to save our cattle," Ron said.

"We couldn't get hay into our country," Cal told him, with a touch of bitterness. "It was dog eat dog, and the cattlemen took our loads of hay by force. Sheep ate right down to the dirt. Yes, I know, it gave the range a bad setback, but the sheep wanted to live. Thousands of them died, at that. Diablo River fell away to a trickle. Sheep drift-

ed downstream eating moss off of the boulders, and some of them smelled grass and turned up here. We didn't miss them at first, then started hunting."

"Plenty of tracks?" Ron asked.

"Practically a highway," Cal said. "Well, we found them in here. It was our idea to fatten them up and drive them upstream before the rains set in. You'll remember cloudbursts finally turned Diablo River into a yellow flood. The stream hasn't been down since. We built a raft and floated downstream. It was either do that or live on sheep the rest of our lives. We had no idea what we were running into."

"What did you run into?"

"You'll find out when we leave." Cal nodded sagely. "This is a one-way stream, Ron."

"How do you get the sheep to market?"

"We don't."

"What?" Ron bellowed.

"We don't," Cal repeated. "We've burned up our brains trying to figger a way to get the best flock of sheep in the country to market, and the answer hasn't come to us yet."

So that was it! That was the trick in Uncle Ed Davis' bequest. Hank had to make a sick mine pay out, while he, Ron, had to market sheep that couldn't be driven to market.

"Have you any idea at all how we can market these sheep?" Ron asked Cal. "Offhand I can't see any answer."

"Zednick, who owned them when they were trapped here, spent many a night trying to figger a way to cash in," Cal said. "He couldn't get an answer that made sense. Naturally he didn't know your uncle was in the background when he sold the sheep, or he wouldn't have sold to any blasted cattleman. But aside from that he was plumb glad to sell."

"Suppose we leave this 'blasted cattleman' stuff out of it?" Ron suggested. "We've got to pull together."

"In your eyes I'm a 'blasted sheepman'," Cal answered. "Or won't you admit it?"

"Sure, I'll admit it," Ron said. "I was born a cattleman, raised a cattleman, and I'll be a cattleman as long as I live."

"And you show it, or at least a sheepman senses it," Cal said. "Though you've been decent enough since you showed up here. But we feel it, and that's why you're licked at the start. It takes an experienced cattleman to raise beef, and a sheepman has to know as much about sheep if he makes any money. You're licked because no sheepman will give everything he's got to help you beat the game."

RON was looking at Cal calculatingly. "You're an educated man," he said suddenly. "How did you happen to go in for sheep?"

"I never went to school after the fourth grade," Cal told him. "But a man can herd sheep, go into a trance for hours at a time, and become a mental case, or he can put in his time studying. I wore out more pockets carrying books than I ever did keeping my hands warm. Here's something else you shortsighted cattlemen have overlooked."

"Shoot," Ron invited. "I like to listen to a man who knows what he's talking about. In my language a spade is a spade."

"You've knocked around," Cal said, "and maybe you're wider between the eyes than some cattlemen, but here's the play. We sheepmen have range that would be better for cattle. You cattlemen have range that would be fine for sheep, but isn't much good for cattle. If all of us could get together and talk horse sense we could divide up the range in a way that would make it produce more beef and mutton as well as end the sheep-cattle war in this region. It costs us money when cattlemen stop us from driving our sheep to a railroad. But you spend money stopping us. Both sides need an understanding."

"What else?"

"If—I say *if* you can win the confidence of the run of the mill sheepman and still not lose the faith the cattlemen have in you, you might bring this about," Cal said, "but at the first sign of anything like that you'd have Trig Tremper setting in the game with five aces."

"Who's Trig Tremper?"

"Oh, a sort of promoter who blew into the country some time ago—buys up land, cattle, whatever. Investing, he calls it, says he's looking for any kind of good property. He's sure bought—or sold—plenty of ructions hereabout, though. I've never figgered out whether Trig makes trouble between factions because he hopes to cash in on it, or because he likes to set man against man and then watch the fun. I do know this—he uses catspaws for his dirty work, and is never hurt himself."

"Yellow?"

"I think any man who'll let another take an enemy's lead when he's the one who should stand up to it, is yellow," Cal answered thoughtfully. "But Trig has pride. If people are around he'll stand up to anything. It's happened a couple of times. But nine times out of ten he's in the background and his catspaw is up front."

"What does the catspaw think of all this?"

"He never figgers that far back." Cal shrugged. "He thinks it's his own fight,"

"Getting back to the sheep," Ron said. "Have you thought of rafting them downstream to some point, then driving them out?"

"Bad water down the canyon." Cal shook his head. "If you build a raft strong enough to go through the canyon, then your profit is gone. You can't use a raft over and over and over because you can't get it back upstream again. We thought of cutting a trail out of the valley, but that means powder and lots of hardrock drilling. There goes all immediate profit, as well as future sheep crops. It would be cheaper to start a ranch elsewhere."

Ron looked at the sheep. "The point is a man hates to see unused wealth, whether it is sheep, gold in a creek bed, or good range without stock."

From Cal he learned that at least once a month someone rafted downstream, checked on the flock, often remaining several days, then continuing on to Little River, a small settlement. There the stream, Little River, entered the Diablo. A railroad spanned the larger stream, and continued on to Red Coulee, climbing steadily.

A shelter cabin had been created on the inaccessible sheep ranch, and was stocked with canned grub.

"We lose the weaker ones every winter," Cal said. "Snow comes and they can't rustle like the others. We should cut hay and stack it, for that would help. The trouble is we've no way of getting horses and machinery in. Anyhow, if we got too many sheep in here they'd overgraze. He grinned, "It's a challenge, isn't it?"

"Let's go on downstream," Ron suggested.

"We'd better rest tonight," Cal advised. "Fighting white water takes a lot out of a man. I like to start fresh."

III

RON and Cal Lawrence left at daybreak for the thirty-mile run down the Diablo. As others had done whenever they made the trip, Ron searched the forbidding walls for a way out. There were breaks, forming small valleys, but they usually ended up against mountains.

"Sure you could build a trail out," Cal said in answer to Ron's question, "but there, again, you run into heavy expense. And beyond—some cattleman's wire."

To Ron's way of thinking, it amounted to wheels within wheels. You made one wheel turn but a smaller one quit and stopped the machinery. Every idea he suggested already had been tried or considered and found wanting. It went on and on.

"Uncle Ed's ghost is enjoying this," he reflected. "I wonder how Jed will make out with his brick yard, and what will Hank do about the mine? The real prize is the Bar D, and something or someone is getting that on a silver platter."

He saw another break in the wall and asked Cal to land. "Glad to," the sheepman answered shortly. "The water's high and rough today. My arms ache."

He sprawled out on the grass while Ron looked over another valley as good

as the first. Except for an eagle there wasn't a living creature in sight. For ages wild hay had grown annually and rotted. He could jump up and down almost anywhere and feel the deep sod give under his weight.

"And to think it was like this during the dry years," he mused, "when sheep and cattle were starving."

"One way to go crazy," Cal said when Ron returned, "is to think what you could do with places like that if the Government would build a road into them."

Cal shoved off, grabbed the oar and headed for the nearest white water. Here, the stream bucked like an outlaw horse as the current struck a series of large boulders.

They emerged into a stretch of smooth water, and their speed slowed down to about a mile an hour. They were drifting across a deep pool. Water leaped ahead of them in an angry jet, then the faint crack of a rifle echoed along the higher cliffs. Before the echo died away, a second jet leaped up.

"Overboard!" Cal yelled. "Water'll break the bullet's force."

As Ron rolled toward the raft's edge he saw a man's head and shoulders nearly three hundred feet above. Lying on his back he began emptying his .44.

"You can't hit him at that distance!" Cal shouted.

A bullet thudded into the raft as Ron fired his fifth shot. He was just aiming for the sixth when the man's rifle slid down a short slope.

"Look—look!" Call yelled. "He's slipping!"

Slowly, then with increasing speed, the man came down the slope. It was a forty- or fifty-foot stretch of rock, pitched like a roof. As the man made no effort to save himself Ron realized that he was unconscious. He dropped limply, head downward, arms and legs dangling. A column of white water shot up as the body struck.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," Cal exclaimed, "I wouldn't have believed you could've shot that fellow off his perch with a six-gun!"

Ron was a crack shot, but he knew that the odds had been all against his hitting the fellow. He had presented a small target, then there was the distance, and the raft had been moving. His only purpose in firing had been to force the man to hunt cover until the raft had drifted out of range.

Bubbles boiled up just ahead and when the raft was opposite Ron had his boots and clothing off. He went overboard with Cal's protests ringing in his ears. He dived, saw the man's arm and grasped the wrist. He started upward, lungs bursting, legs and free hand driving upward. He emerged gasping, and almost blue in the face.

Cal had kept the raft close to the spot. He dropped the oar, caught Ron's wrist, pulled him to the raft, then caught the other man's clothing and dragged him aboard. A crimson stream marked the passage of the body through the water. The man was dead.

Panting, Ron climbed aboard.

"You'd better get into your clothes," Cal advised, "while I lash this cuss to the raft. We've got more bad water ahead."

While Cal was steering the raft through the bad water, and Ron was hanging on, he had a chance to look over the body.

"He's a tough looking customer," Ron said. "Swarthy; three days' whiskers on his face; scar on his head where a bullet creased him sometime or other." He pulled up the dead man's shirt, and pointed. "The bullet that killed this hombre, Cal, entered his right shoulder and ranged *downward*. My bullet could never have done that. Somebody picked off this fellow just at the moment he stood a fine chance of getting both of us."

CAL said nothing until he felt he needed another breathing spell, then he grounded the raft.

"High-powered rifle killed him," he said then, after a brief glance at the wound.

"Have you got an enemy?" Ron asked. "Someone who knew you came downstream ever so often?"

"A sheepman always has enemies," Cal said, with a shrug. "But I never laid

eyes on this man before. . . . Wait!" He turned the man's head until he got a profile view. "I'll take it back. Notice the jaw? It sticks out like a hunk of granite. He's one of Trig Tremper's men. I saw him drinking with Tremper and three or four of his outfit in the Water-hole, Red Coulee's biggest saloon. And it's one water-hole where the only water around is used for chasers and washing glasses."

"I'd say that this man was gunning for you," Ron said, "and that some friend of yours finished him off. I haven't been here long enough to make friends or enemies."

"The instant you agreed to accept the terms of your Uncle Ed's will you had friends and enemies," Cal declared. "I think this man was out to get both of us."

"Why?"

"Because everybody knows I'm one sheepman who wants to see both factions get along and who'll come half way once I'm sure a cattleman is offering a deal that's on the level. You're a cattlemen who suddenly has interest in sheep—a big stake. You want to get along, too. We get together."

"Who knows that except sheepmen?" Ron asked. "All that's known about me is that I left Red Coulee to look over the Diablo Canyon Ranch."

"Anyone watching from the rimrock could guess we'd talked things over and were pulling together," Cal said. "Now one man don't want us pulling together —Trig Temper. I'll bet you ten dollars against an empty cartridge shell that this is one of Tremper's catspaws. He paid for it with his life—as others have done."

"A friend of yours got him."

"No, Ron." Cal shook his head. "My friends have let me take care of myself. The truth is that you've picked up a guardian angel who watched over you when you needed it most."

He picked up the oar and together they pushed the raft into deep water.

Both men were dog-tired and drenched to the skin when they landed at Little River. The remains of other rafts lay scattered among the boulders. Some of them had been used for campfires where passing punchers spent the night.

"I'll get Doc Smart," Cal told Ron. "He's the coroner. I don't think we'll have any trouble after we've told what happened."

Doc Smart listened quietly to their story. He had spent a lifetime in the West and instinctively knew whether men were lying or telling the truth. He released Ron and Cal and said he would make a report to the sheriff.

The two men spent the night in Little River and caught a morning train for Red Coulee. As the train was slowing down to a stop Cal said:

"I'm taking orders from you now. What do you want me to do?"

"Just as you've done in the past," Ron told him. "When I work out the next move I'll be out to see you. You might send a man in with my horse."

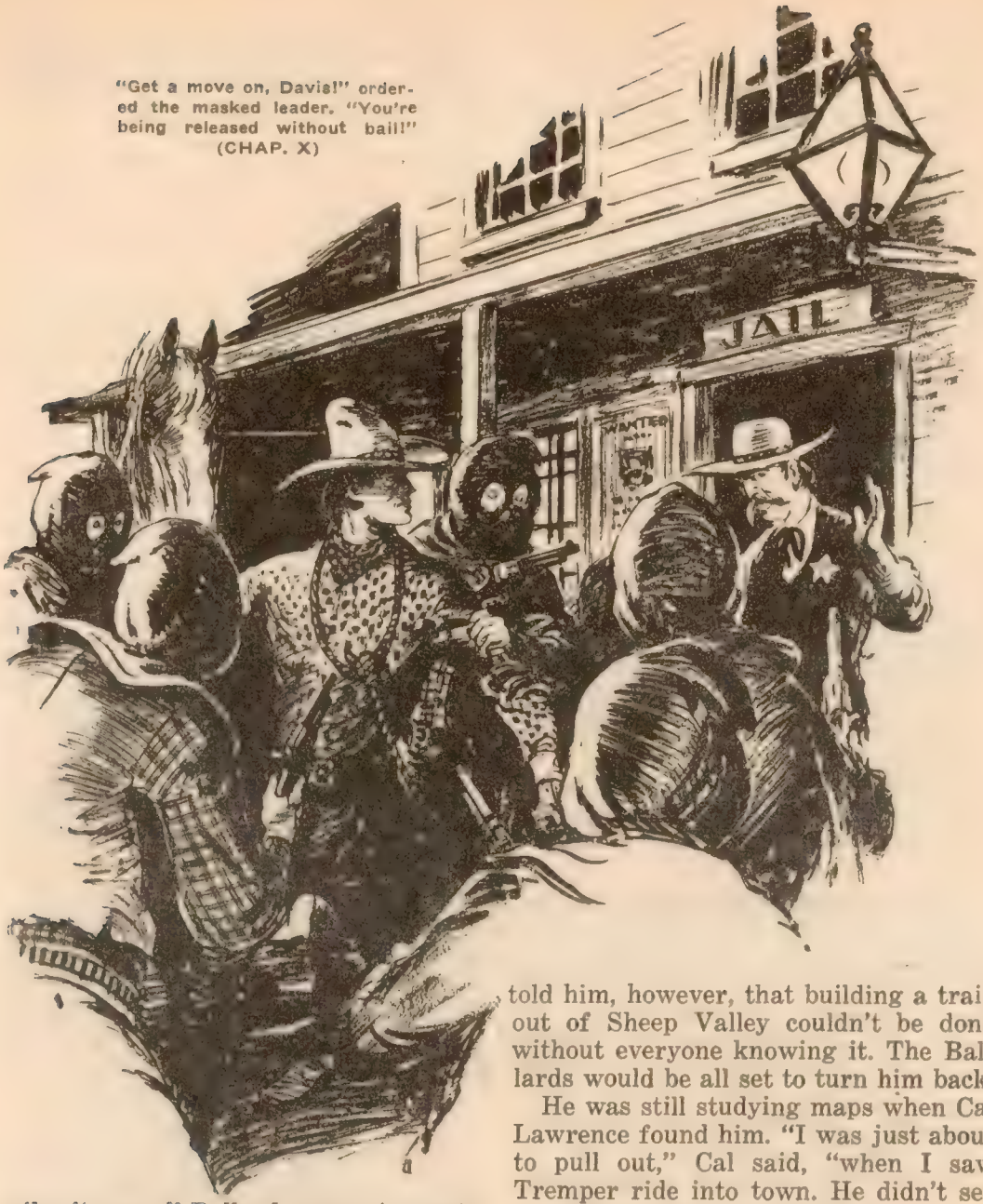
Ron put up at the Red Coulee Hotel, then went over to the court house and asked to see maps of the Diablo Canyon region. He felt sure there must be some way of constructing a trail out of the valley where his sheep grazed. Sheep could move through bad country without breaking their necks—unless stampeded.

"Suppose I do spend more on trail-making than the first or even second shipment of mutton is worth?" he argued with himself. "I'll have the trail won't I?"

On the maps he spread before him long spaces on either side of the Diablo Canyon were marked, "Unsurveyed." Someone in the past had floated downstream and marked the points where creeks entered the river. The distances between creeks were probably accurate, but the streams themselves were little more than twisting lines set down at the map-maker's whim. None had been surveyed. Someone had written "Sheep Valley" and "Sheep Creek" on the crooked line marking the grazing area of Ron's imprisoned flocks.

"I guess that's what it'll be from now on," he muttered.

He shifted his interest to the surveyed area east of Sheep Creek. For



"Get a move on, Davis!" ordered the masked leader. "You're being released without bail!" (CHAP. X)

miles it was all Ballard range. A county road marked Ballard's easterly boundary. Then east of the highway it was all Bar D range.

THE prospect was almost hopeless. With Ballard cooperation he might accomplish something, but with the way Betty Ballard and her mother felt about all of the Davis clan they would block anything Ron attempted. But with luck he might drive his flocks across their range to Bar D range before they knew what was going on. His common sense told him, however, that building a trail out of Sheep Valley couldn't be done without everyone knowing it. The Ballards would be all set to turn him back.

He was still studying maps when Cal Lawrence found him. "I was just about to pull out," Cal said, "when I saw Tremper ride into town. He didn't see me. Suppose we lay low and—"

"Lay low, your grandmother!" Ron snorted. "Let's go out and look him up. I'm hiding from no one."

"This is no way for a man to talk to his boss," Cal answered, "but you hot-tempered chump, keep your shirt on until I'm through, can't you? I'd like to tie Tremper in with the cuss who tried to drygulch us. He'd send his best man, wouldn't he?"

"That's right," Ron agreed.

"And sending his best man," Ron argued logically, "he'd naturally believe

the job would be done. So if we suddenly pop up in front of him he's going to be surprised. The worst of it is, he may not show it. But if he does, we'll know he was behind the ambushing."

"He doesn't know me," Ron said.

"I'll make you a bet he sized you up the day you got to Red Coulee," Cal said.

"Let me know when he's in the Water-hole," Ron said, "and we'll drop in for a snort. I'm going to the hotel to get cleaned up. . . ."

From his hotel window Ron could see the brick yard. The plant had shut down, which might mean there were no orders. But it was more than likely that Jed Davis had decided not to make bricks. In the back of the man's mind, Ron decided, was the idea that their Uncle Ed's will could be broken.

Cal didn't drop in to see Ron until nine o'clock that evening.

"I just saw Trig Tremper," he said as he entered Ron's room. "He's in the Water-hole now."

Ron reached for his hat. "He'll be at the bar, of course. We'll come up on him from behind. He'll see us in the bar mirror."

"And we'll be watching his eyes," Cal said.

Ron had been in the place only two or three times so he let Cal lead the way. This visit, he reasoned, was not likely to result in gun play, or he would have been first to part the batwing doors.

"Plenty of sheepmen and cattlemen in here tonight," Cal observed.

"They seem to be getting along well enough," Ron said.

"They *have* to," Cal declared positively, "Foghorn Carrigan runs the place and tends bar during the rush hour. He read somewhere about African waterholes where all kinds of animals meet in a sort of truce. Carrigan thought it a fine idea, so he made that the rule in his saloon."

"But can he enforce the rule?"

"You obey the rule or get your skull cracked," Cal declared. "Foghorn is a broken-down baseball pitcher. He keeps billiard balls in racks behind the bar. When a brawl starts he bellows, 'Cut it out—cut it out!' and if you don't, he winds up and lets fly with a billiard ball."

Ron had an idea he was going to like the Water-hole. It promised excitement.

"That's Tremper," Cal whispered. "The good-looking one in the middle of the bar."

The bar was forty feet long and the backbar mirror was thirty feet long, with two short, five-foot sections on either end. "Foghorn" Carrigan, the man who owned the mirrors and the barroom, too, wasn't more than five feet eight, but he boasted a deep chest, tremendous shoulders and long arms. His big hands looked out of place as he put small whisky glasses in front of "Trig" Tremper and his two companions.

Foghorn made some humorous remark and Tremper began laughing. But the laugh seemed mechanical to Ron who, with Cal, was directly behind Tremper.

"Now we'll go to the bar," Cal said.

They sauntered to the rail, but with eyes on Tremper's reflection in the mirror. In the midst of his laughter he saw them, and for an instant his face showed amazement, then he picked up his laugh where he had left off and said something that caused Foghorn to roar with laughter.

CAL and Ron shifted toward one end of the bar.

"We surprised him," Cal said. "We can't prove a thing, but it shows us the way the wind's blowing. And—we've been complimented. Tremper orders the death of only those he considers dangerous. How does it feel to be a dangerous man, Ron?"

"I can't say that I feel any different," Ron drawled.

Foghorn came to them with a cheerful, "What'll it be, boys?"

"Whisky straight," Cal said. "Something out of that pinch bottle should be about right. We need it."

"Yes? Coming down with a cold, or did a snake bite you?"

"A snake struck at us," Ron said.

"Somebody killed him. He fell into the river ahead of our raft and we left him with the coroner at Little River."

"Oh, comin' down the Diablo again was you, Lawrence?" Foghorn said to Cal. "Any idea who it was tried to 'gulch you?"

As Red Coulee's most important barkeep he tried to keep abreast of all the news of the town and the range. It helped business to be able to say to a slightly corned customer, "Just between us two, here's the lowdown on that killing . . ."

"The coroner found something on him that gave him a clue as to who was behind it all." Cal's voice was loud enough for Tremper to hear. "Wouldn't say what it was. I reckon he's after the hombre himself."

"You know the killer's name?"

Cal shook his head. "He was new to these parts. Coroner didn't know him. A letter on him from back East was addressed to Milo Franzen, Red Coulee. You know him? Medium-sized man, sandy hair. Had a Spanish senorita tatooed on his left forearm."

"Sure, I knew him!" Foghorn exclaimed. "He used to make the senorita dance by wiggling his skin. She could do the blamedest dances you ever saw. So he tried to drygulch you, huh? It just goes to show you can't always depend on some men any more'n you can depend on a curve breakin' just right when there're three balls against you, the bases loaded and nobody out. Any idea who killed this Franzen while he was tryin' to kill you?"

"None in the world," Cal said positively.

Foghorn looked at Ron, who said, "I never saw him before, either. There was a time I knew everyone around Red Coulee, but not any more." He grinned. "But that's being taken care of. I'll be staying here, or hereabouts for quite a while now."

Tremper, leaning easily against the bar, turned and looked at Ron, then he turned back to one of his companions, a burly man with bulging muscles and short neck whom he called "Beefy."

Tremper came over to Ron then, and Ron had a chance really to size up the man. He was a half-inch under six feet, with good shoulders, a fine head and nose. His mouth beneath his black mustache, was strong and ruthless. His teeth were white and even, but his smile lacked warmth. It was the sort that could be turned off and on again at will. He probably had a way with the ladies, and men also would like him.

Tremper's eyes were smiling—on the surface. But deep in them Ron saw cold calculation and something suggestive of melting ice. Ron compared the man with his cousin, Hank, who was a planner, a schemer, out to get something of value with little effort.

Trig Tremper was a man who lived for power. With him money could be incidental except as a means of providing him with comfort and gaining his objectives. This man, Ron sensed, would rather hold the whip hand over his fellows than to have a million dollars on deposit in a sound bank.

"You must be Ron Davis, the new owner of Diablo Canyon Ranch," the man said pleasantly. "I'm John Tremper—Trig, for short."

His hand was waiting for Ron to take it. A small hand for a man his size, but one incredibly swift with knife or gun, Ron guessed. And his grasp was strong.

"I'm glad to see a new set-up at Diablo Ranch," he said. "There must be some answer to that problem. It often happens that an outsider can spot the answer to a puzzle immediately."

"I haven't any such answer so far," Ron told him.

He wanted none of Trig's compliments, nor did he want to accept the drink that naturally would be offered. Yet he couldn't refuse. To do so would indicate to Tremper that Ron had put him down as an enemy.

IV

GLANCING about the saloon, Ron saw that nearly everyone was watching the meeting of the two men. In Ron they saw the strongest member of the Davis clan since Ed Davis himself. They knew Trig Tremper. They knew, too, that

these two men would either fight it out in range battles, or would throw in together with the idea of gaining complete control of the Red Coulee region—probably later cutting each other's throats neatly. Though, so far Ron was an unknown quantity.

The sheepmen, in particular, were weighing Ron Davis. While Cal Lawrence apparently had accepted him, the others wanted proof that he was with them, and not just a cattlemen's spy taking an advantage of a situation.

"Join me in a drink, Davis?" Trig invited.

"Thanks," Ron answered, noting that Cal had not been included.

Cal, sensing this was all part of a plan hatched between Trig and Beefy, stepped out of the picture in order not to complicate matters. And the pieces began to fit rapidly into the pattern Cal had visualized.

"How about joining us?" Trig asked Beefy. "Meet Ron Davis, heir apparent to the Bar D."

"I'm not the heir apparent," Ron corrected. "I fell heir only to a tough crust that fell from the table."

Trig drawled, "I—wonder." He shrugged and looked at Beefy.

"I can stand another drink," Beefy said, "but bein' a cattleman I'm kind of a particular who I drink with. I don't drink with no dirty sheepman."

Dead silence fell in the saloon. Foghorn glanced at his racked billiard balls and instinctively rubbed the muscles of his pitching arm. The sheepmen grew tense, the cattlemen looked at Ron speculatively.

"I'm a sheepman," Ron said. "I own the Diablo Canyon Ranch, in case you want details."

"Not bein' either sheepman or cattleman," Beefy said to Trig, "you can afford to drink with him. Me? I got my pride. There're funny critters in the world."

"Such as?" Ron softly queried.

"Such as . . . we'll begin a little ways up and work down," Beefy sneered. "There're rattlesnakes, then skunks. Droppin' lower, you find lizards and the slimy things you find under rocks, then comes—sheepmen."

"Excuse me," Ron said to Trig Tremper, "I'll have that drink later. A man has sheepmen sized up all wrong. I want to see if I can't kind of straighten him out."

"The first man that makes a move," Foghorn roared, "will get a billiard ball on his skull! I run a quiet, peaceful place. And if there's any fightin' done in the Water-hole, I'll do it meself."

"There'll be no fighting done *in* the Water-hole," Ron said over his shoulder, and he kept right on going toward Beefy.

Ron kept his hands up defensively, but he made no effort to hit the big fellow. Ron didn't hunt trouble, but when he saw it coming he believed in hitting first. Now, however, he was remembering Foghorn Carrigan's rule—no fighting in the Water-hole. And there stood Foghorn, billiard balls in hand, ready for the first man who broke the rule.

Ron's steady advance was too much for Beefy. He lashed out a vicious blow, then ducked. The billiard ball whistled past Ron's ear and struck Beefy's skull a glancing blow. Some two hundred and thirty pounds fell with a ponderous crash. The ball rolled over the floor, glancing off table and chair legs. It hit the wall and rebounded.

"If that was your fast ball, Foghorn," Ron said, "no wonder you struck 'em out."

He picked up the dazed Beefy and started for the back door.

"Where're you going?" one of Beefy's friends asked.

"I'm taking him outside where he can revive," Ron answered, "and where we can fight without breaking house rules."

"House rules," the other sneered. "Dude talk."

"Travel broadens a man," Ron observed, as he backed through the rear door with his burden.

As Beefy's companion followed, Cal Lawrence moved in.

RON eased Beefy to the ground, and squatted beside the man.

"What's your play?" Cal asked.

"I haven't made up my mind yet,"

Ron said coolly. "If I take on Beefy when he comes to, it won't be a fair fight. A crack on the head like that takes something out of a man. Yet I can't back down."

"You've cashed in so far," Cal said. "The sheepmen know you're with them in this deal, anyway. Of course, once a cattleman, always a cattleman, as the feller says. But this once, you're with our crowd. We know you won't let us down."

"Did you have any doubts?" Ron bluntly inquired.

Cal shook his head. "I didn't, once I got acquainted with you. But I wanted the others to take you at their own value, and not on my say-so. This can turn into a first-class ruckus. We're set and there're plenty of cattlemen waiting for a fight."

"We'll do our fighting on the range," Ron said. "Where's Tremper?"

"Inside, gabbing with Foghorn," Cal answered. "His men will take care of things out here, he thinks. They're thicker'n fleas."

Beefy was regaining consciousness, though still dazed. "Beefy," Ron said, "our little deal didn't work out as we'd planned."

"I know it, Trig," Beefy muttered. With his brain still foggy from the blow, it was easy for him to mistake Ron's voice for Tremper's. "We'll get him, Trig, we'll get him. That Ron Davis hit me a dirty blow. I wasn't lookin'."

"Foghorn hit you, Beefy," Ron said. Beefy's ears were hearing things, but his vision hadn't returned.

Beefy gazed stupidly at Ron without recognizing him. His ears were functioning, but his sight had not returned. "Beefy," Ron said, "you should love sheepmen."

The results were surprising. Beefy's eyes blinked, and he weaved his feet.

"Take it easy, Beefy," Ron warned. "The birdies are still singing."

The hulk of a man smirked and staggered around chanting:

"The birdies are singing, and Beefy loves sheepmen! The birds are singing, and Beefy loves sheepmen!"

A Tremper man dashed into the saloon. "Trig," he yelled, "you'd better get out there! Beefy has gone crazier than a loon."

Tremper's lips tightened as he stepped toward the man.

"You fool!" he snarled. "I've told you never to connect me with your men." His lips hardly moved, but his eyes held a deadly challenge.

"I was afraid Beefy would spill somethin'!" the accused man whined.

"Get out there and take care of him," Trig ordered.

He glanced around to note whether others had heard, then breathed easier. Except for a pair of miners, stiff from too much celebrating, only Foghorn was within earshot. And Foghorn believed that a man might live to a ripe old age in the West by minding his own business.

Tremper returned to the bar.

"You were saying, Foghorn?" he gently suggested.

"Yes," Foghorn remarked brightly, "it beats the Dutch what fine weather we're having." He had completely forgotten what they had been talking about. "Then taxes get higher all the time. You have to pay as high as forty-five dollars a month and found for good bartenders. It seems like a man can't lay aside a cent."

Trig Tremper mechanically discussed the troubles of the saloon business with Foghorn, but he was wondering what was going on outside. Men out there were laughing. Finally he heard Ron say:

"He's in no shape to put up a fight. Somebody had better put him to bed."

Outside the rear door of the saloon, Ron Davis watched two men lead Beefy away, then he went back to his hotel. A half-dozen sheepmen followed him to his room. They got down to business immediately.

"Some of us have small bands we can't drive through the cattle country," one of them said, "but your flocks in Sheep Valley are the big ones. We figgered at first you was helpin' only yourself. Now Cal tells us the idea is to help all of us."

"That's right," Ron agreed. "But first, we've got to raise some money. What about the bank?"

"Bank's owned by cattlemen," Cal said. "We can't get help there. Most of the boys have weathered some lean years. This is the year to clean up, if it can be done."

"What about private money?"

"Too much chance of losing everything if a flock is stampeded. If you want to learn to stand on your own hind legs, become a sheepman." On Cal's face was a wry grin.

EASILY Ron drew them out, listening to each man express his opinion of conditions, then he summed up their ideas. He didn't blame banks and private money for not backing them. Ron had seen some lost causes in his time, but this topped all of them.

"Look discouraged when you leave," Ron advised. "Let Tremper and the others believe they have us beaten."

"Looking discouraged these days is the easiest thing I can do," one of them asserted. But at the door he stopped and grinned. "Maybe we'll get licked in the end, but we'll have a lot of fun fighting it out. . . ."

Ron was waiting in front of Abner Webb's office when the range lawyer opened up. "The early bird, eh, Ron?" Webb commented.

"And not a worm in sight," Ron answered, following him inside. "What are my worthy cousins doing about things?"

"Blast 'em!" the lawyer exploded. "They're going into a huddle and crying. The brick-yard, the mine, your sheep ranch all come back to the estate if you boys don't operate your bequests successfully. I've enough troubles on my hands with this estate without going into the mining, brick, and sheep business. You seem to be doing something. But what?"

"How about borrowing some money for expenses?" Rod asked.

"No chance. You've got mutton and wool ready for the market, Ron, and that should be enough, according to your uncle's way of thinking. Cash in. Show a profit of seventy-five hundred dollars above expenses, and the property is yours. Simple as shooting fish in a barrel."

"I've had a chance to size up the various angles," Ron said. "For me, it's going to be an unprofitable fight. But I'm going to do my best to win it. I'm going to market those sheep at loss if necessary. When they're out of the trap. When the sheepmen and cattlemen have worked out some deal for the good of all I'm going to throw my saddle on my best horse and ride, leaving you with what's left of the sheep business, as well as the brick yard and sick mine. When your head aches too much, just turn the whole works over to the mysterious beneficiary of Uncle Ed's will and call it a day."

To his surprise Webb roared with laughter. "The expression on a face that I know of when that party gets the brickyard and the mine!" he exploded, and roared again. "That party will be fit to be tied."

"Let me know when it happens," Ron said. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"And I wouldn't let you miss it for anything," Webb told him.

"You may have to send me train fare," Ron warned.

"It's a promise," Webb said. "Say, I hear somebody tried to pot you and Cal Lawrence as you came down the river?"

"And got potted himself by someone before he could finish the job," Ron said grimly. "My guardian angel, I guess."

Webb tugged thoughtfully at his jaw. He seemed to be taking Ron's off-hand comment about guardian angels seriously.

"I wonder who it could have been," he said musingly. "I wonder. . . ."

Several days after Cal Lawrence left Red Coulee, to look after Ron's open range sheep, Ron rode up to the camp used by the men who herded the smaller flock. He dismounted and walked around the buildings. There was the usual tin can dump a few rods from the kitchen door, several dozen chickens pecking away at the hard ground, and packhorses grazing nearby.

Cal had not yet gone over to the Diablo Canyon flock. He wanted to know what was going on.

"I've tried to raise money," Ron reported. "No luck. How much can the sheepmen in the upper Diablo River country scrape together?"

"Only a few thousand between them," Cal said soberly.

"All right, then. Instead of trying to market mutton right now, let's gather the wool crop. We can pick up money from wool here, and a chunk of it from the Sheep Valley flocks."

Cal shrugged. "It's getting back to the same old problem again—shipping. Mutton can come out on its own feet if it can get through the cattle country, but wool has to be packed." He shook his head. "And the cattle crowd sees us bringing out wool they'll stampede our pack train, or some such trick."

"What's wrong with water transportation?" Ron suggested. "Build a barge at the headwater of Diablo River. Float it downstream, picking up bales of wool along the way."

"One that would float and stand the pounding would cost plenty of money," Cal argued. "We've got to be practical. And what if our barge hits a rock—we can't miss all of them—and sinks. Or at least spills the load into the river."

THAT problem did not hold Ron.

"We'll make a nonsinkable barge," he declared easily. "Come out in back and I'll show you what I mean. Then you send a man upstream to tell the sheepmen to saw some planks for barges. We'll get the bolts, nails and all to them some way. That's the quickest way I know of to raise money in a hurry."

"By golly!" Cal said at last. "It might work! We'll make it work."

"While you're getting the barge started," Ron said, "I'm going to take a chance on locating a trail out of Sheep Valley, through Ballard range to the highway."

"If any of the Ballard outfit see you you'll be shot on sight," Cal warned. "You know Mrs. Ballard and Betty believe your uncle killed Major Ballard."

"I'm not forgetting that for a minute," Ron said tightly. "All right. You get busy. I'll go back to town and order the bolts and nails we'll need. Line up a team of good horses, and what farm machinery we'll need for Sheep Valley. I'd like to put up hay just in case."

"You may lose your shirt in this deal, Ron," Cal said, "but at least you're doing something. To give the devil his due, your uncle was the only man in this part of the country who had any get up and get. Then old age caught up with him and he got tired. . . ."

The general store in Red Coulee had everything Ron needed. Any single item wouldn't have caused comment, but the articles taken together spelled boat or barge, and ten minutes later one of Tremper's men had made a report to his boss.

"Ron Davis is up to something," he concluded.

Tremper was interested, and puzzled. He immediately sat down and figured what a water-tight barge would cost.

"They can't do it and make a profit," he declared positively. "He's dragging a red herring across the trail."

A little later when he saw Betty Ballard drive into town with her mother, he crossed the street, pulled off his hat with the gracious gesture he reserved for such occasions and said:

"I'd be honored if you will have dinner with me this noon, Miss Ballard."

Mrs. Ballard, who froze all men with a glance, turned on the frost.

"Decline, Betty," she ordered.

"It is business, Miss Ballard," Tremper suggested. "I feel that your holdings are in danger. The sheepmen threaten to become powerful, and that means less range for your cattle. You realize that."

"You haven't mentioned names," she quietly observed.

"Ron Davis," he said.

"Mother, I'm having dinner with Mr. Tremper," the girl said. "I think it is time we talked over our affairs with a businessman." Weariness crept into her voice. "I'm tired of—making mistakes."

"Drop me off at Aunt Hetty's, then,"

Mrs. Ballard said crisply.

"Thank you, Mr. Tremper," Betty said. "I'll accept your invitation."

"I'll meet you in the hotel lobby at twelve o'clock," Tremper said. "Everything will be arranged."

V

PROMPTLY at eleven thirty Trig Tremper arrived at the hotel corner of the dining room where he could talk and not be overheard. When Betty arrived he escorted her to the table, and talked of unimportant things until after the waitress had taken their order. Then he got down to business.

"I've watched your brave struggle with sympathy and understanding," he said. "Your father came from splendid stock and expected to live to an advanced age. He planned for you never to bear the burden of ranch management, believing, no doubt, that the right man would come along and carry on when he dropped the load."

"I wasn't trained for ranch life," the girl said. "My mother had plans of her own. But all that is water over the wheel now."

"Your father's span was cut short," Tremper said, profound sadness in his voice. "I'm confident that if Ed Davis had lived, I could have proved that he was guilty of your father's murder, but that, too, is water over the wheel. Now here is the present situation. We find both cattlemen and sheepmen weakened by range wars."

"That's right," Betty agreed. "And it seems that nothing can be done about it."

"Cattlemen engaged in range wars among themselves," Tremper went on. "The fight between your father and Ed Davis was one of that type. But the cattlemen now are without adequate leadership. And, finally, a dead man's hand is reaching from the grave, adding to the strife."

"You refer to the provision in Ed Davis' will?" Betty suggested.

"That's it. The old devil knew what he was doing. He could never control Ron, but he knew the boy had brains and a quality for leadership. And it's time cattlemen hereabouts realized it. Ron Davis has gone over to the sheepmen, lock, stock and barrel, and he is taking with him wide experience as a cattleman. He knows our strength and weakness. I say *our* because, while I don't own an acre of range or head of stock at the present time, I'm a cattleman at heart. Returning to your situation, Miss Ballard, I'd like to recommend a manager for your ranch."

"We've had something like that in mind," Betty said.

"The man I have in mind, Buck Young, will be available in ninety days," he said. "In the meantime I'll be glad to do anything I can for you. I have plenty of free time. In fact, I'm waiting for an investment opportunity to develop."

"But we couldn't accept your services without pay," she protested.

Tremper knew the Ballard pride and independence.

"Pay me what you would pay any foreman," he suggested. "When Buck Young comes I'll fade from the scene. In the meantime, keep an eye on the young man who has just entered the dining room."

She glanced toward the door and saw Ron Davis taking a seat at an unoccupied table. She felt a tightness in her throat.

"Mother tried to train range impulses out of me," she thought. "The desire to fight for grazing land, for cattle, for independence and the urge to war against injustice. Dad backed her up because he had wanted me to miss it. But it's still within me." She felt such a sudden savageness that she was afraid of it, but she knew it was necessary to carry her through the sort of wars that develop on the range.

"I wonder if I'd shoot a Davis if it became necessary," she thought.

Tremper was studying her. "Here's explosive that can be hard to handle," he reflected, "and I thought I had only a boarding school product on my hands."

When they separated Tremper was well pleased with his progress. He

would show up at the Ballard spread, then learn their true financial condition, which was the reason for his cautious approach.

When he knew how much money all the hard-put ranchers had behind them, then he would know how much of an effort was required to smash them. What Tremper was after, as usual, was the debris left after a financial smash. But such debris was a stepping stone to power.

As for "Buck" Young, the magical young man who would work wonders with the Ballard spread, he was a mythical buckaroo who had helped Tremper over many a rough spot.

Trig Tremper was in the lobby when Ron came out of the dining room.

"I'm sorry, Davis," he said, "that I was tied up. I'd have enjoyed eating with you. I'd like to know you better."

"Just keep on mixing into things," Ron thought, "and we'll get better acquainted." Aloud he said, "We'll run across each other from time to time."

HE WENT up to his room and Tremper went to the Water-hole. Three of his men glanced his way, but Tremper motioned to only one of them.

"Cronk," he said, when the man approached, "I want you to take care of Ron Davis. Milo Franzen made a slip and it cost him his life. Remember that, when you go into action."

Cronk, a stolid type, nodded. "He ain't been here long enough to get any habits yet. I like to wait till a man gets into habits, then it's easy to get him."

"We can't wait, Cronk," Temper said. "Ride into the hills between Ballard barbed wire, and Diablo Canyon. I've an idea Davis wants to look over the country above Sheep Valley."

"What about that barge stuff he bought?" Cronk asked. "There's a wagon load of it."

"Davis is smart enough to divert our attention in one direction while he operates in the other," Tremper said. "You watch the headwaters of Sheep Creek. There are plenty of spots where you can get rid of a man, and you don't have to do much digging, either. I'll double the pay for this. Now watch out or you'll be following Milo Franzen's trail."

Tremper left the Water-hole and crossed the street to the general store. He was about to enter when he noticed Betty and her mother inside. He wanted none of Mrs. Ballard's frosty manners just then. The girl was buying herself a pair of overalls and a hickory shirt and her mother was protesting.

"That girl's on the prod," Tremper grumbled. "And when a girl buys overalls it looks as if she plans to do a lot of riding."

Betty was still making purchases when Ron came in. She ignored him and he gave her a brief glance, went over to the counter and bought a few things he could pack in saddle-bags, some fresh ammunition, and tested the best lariats in the store.

"I'll take a couple," he said. "What's the bill?"

He paid it and left. As he mounted, the Ballards were driving away in their buckboard. And as Ron left town, Cronk was trailing him.

Shortly after dark Ron doubled back on his tracks and pulled into a thicket. He had not seen anyone trailing him, but he believed that if he took precautions a lot of the time he would live longer.

He saw Cronk trot past, but didn't recognize the man. When he had lived in the region long enough, he would be able to identify a man by his profile, even when it was dark—the way he carried his head, the set of his shoulders, the curve of his back as he sat in the saddle.

He opened a gate in the Ballard fence, rode through, and closed it. He rode a couple of miles through the darkness, then made a dry camp. At the peep of day he was on the move, putting as much distance as possible between himself and the road. He kept to the gulches or hugged ridges whenever possible, to reduce the chance of Ballard riders spotting him.

It was late afternoon when he left Ballard rangeland behind him. The country ahead was rough, with little

cattle feed, though sheep might have grown fat on it. Trees struggled for existence, and mostly they were old, twisted into odd shapes, affording poor cover, and almost no shelter from sudden mountain storms.

The granite peak, with the top sliced off, was familiar. Ron had seen it from Sheep Valley, and decided that if he skirted its northerly base he would strike the headwaters of Sheep Creek. Ron camped shortly before sundown.

"Steve," he said to his horse, "it's a good thing I brought grain along. There's not enough feed to fill a sheep in a square mile of this rocky bench."

He ate cold food and spread his blankets, then watched the cold stars come out. An icy wind came from distant peaks and moaned among the piles of granite on the bench. To Ron it seemed as if this debris had been left when the job of making the mountains and Diablo Canyon had been finished.

He awakened before dawn, stiff with cold, got up and stamped about and waited for the first streaks of day to light the peak. While it was still pitch dark in the lower country, a vagrant cloud turned pink, blood red, then gold. The sun reached the peak at length and an eagle drifted from a ledge, wheeling, looking downward. One of those, no doubt, that fed regularly on Ron's lambs.

More cold food, then Ron rode slowly toward a scar near the mountain base that was choked with snow even this late. A trickle of water formed a stream fringed with a thin film of ice.

RON followed it two miles, then it vanished into a crack in the rocks. He left his horse and advanced on foot. It was the toughest country he had ever seen, but sheep could be driven through it. They would lose a lot of fat, but they would make it.

He put in hours trying to locate even a narrow break in the rocks that would lead to the lower country. Invariably a promising start ended up with his looking hundreds of feet straight down to the tops of crags and spires. Beyond them lay Sheep Valley.

At last he found a thirty-foot split between cliffs. The bottom was filled with broken rock, but he made his way through it, one lariat about his shoulders, the other coiled in his hands ready to toss a loop over an outcropping if the going became too difficult.

The crack ended on granite slope that was like a roof several hundred feet in width, and a quarter of a mile long. Sheep could make it from this point to the highway, but what about a trail leading up from Sheep Valley?

Ron removed his high-heeled boots and slung them around his neck. Naked feet gripped the smooth rock and helped, but he looped convenient outcroppings, passing from one to the other, eager to see what lay beyond the point where the "roof" ended in a ragged edge.

Splicing the lariats together, Ron worked his way toward the edge. He was almost there when lead splattered on the rock ten feet ahead of him, and he heard the echo of a rifle among the higher cliffs. He began pulling himself, hand over hand to the shelter of the nearest cliff.

A second and a third bullet came swiftly, the rifleman striving desperately to bring down his quarry before Ron reached cover. High above Ron caught the glint of a rifle barrel, then suddenly it slipped from the man's grasp and disappeared, to shatter against rocks directly below. A distant report floated down to Ron's ears. His would-be killer lay slumped over a ledge and for a moment it looked as if he would plunge downward as Franzen had done, but his legs were caught and he remained there, head and arms dangling. This attack and that made on him by Franzen were amazingly alike, Ron concluded. Both times the ambusher had waited until his intended target was in the open, and helpless to either escape in a hurry or fight back. Both times a dead shot with a rifle had saved Ron's life.

"The guardian angel again," Ron breathed. He drew a long breath, started to make his way to the "roof's" edge, then stopped in surprise.

"What's that?" he muttered.

Caught again at a disadvantage, Ron planted his feet, gripped the lariat between his teeth, and drew both guns. There was no cover, and someone was coming through that crack, kicking rocks right and left.

He heard Betty Ballard's voice, sharp and commanding, crying: "Whoa! Whoa!"

Her horse, crazy with fright and pain, burst into view, blood streaming down its flanks.

"Jump!" Ron yelled. "Jump!"

Betty kicked her feet clear of the stirrups and jumped. Her feet slipped on the smooth surface and she began sliding. She looked at him, despair in her eyes, as he tried to free a lariat.

"Claw at the rocks," he urged, and swore because he couldn't loosen the knot.

She managed to stop her slide and got up, running and slipping toward the ragged side of the "roof," drawing closer to the lower edge. She dived forward, gloved hands clutching at a rough knob a couple of inches high. For a moment she held, then slipped from view.

Ron's heart was pounding as he worked his own way toward the ragged edge. He dug in his feet, eased the strain on the rope, and flipped it free. He coiled it again and dropped the loop ahead of him.

He got to the ragged edge at last and looked down thirty feet. He freed the rope, doubled it and hooked the bight around an outcropping, slid down to the end, let go of one end and dropped, pulling the rope with him. He landed in a crack filled with snow that was packed hard enough to give him a jolt, yet had broken his fall. Betty Ballard lay sprawled thirty feet away. A hundred feet down he saw fragments of her saddle wedged between sharp rocks. The horse had disappeared completely.

Ron carefully straightened out the girl's arms and legs, lifted her head. She was deathly white, breathing in sharp, painful gasps. Her eyes rolled, and Ron felt helpless.

HE TOOK stock of the situation. With the help of the lariats they could make their way down, provided the girl had no broken bones, and wasn't given to dizzy spells. Sheep Valley lay below them, and those gray patches on green carpets were flocks of sheep.

"And I've an idea if we could blast off some of this room," Ron said, "we might make a trail out of the valley."

He looked back at the girl. Her eyes were open, and she was taking in her surroundings, though dazed.

"You had a fall, Betty," he said. "I'm Ron Davis. I don't know what happened to your horse, but—here we are. Take it easy a while longer, then we'll make plans. We'll have to go down. We can't go up."

At length she asked, "And where does *down* lead to?"

"Sheep Valley, then down to Little River on a raft." And he remembered then that he had a lot to learn about handling a raft in white water.

She started to get up. "Take it easy," he said. "We're in no hurry." He hoped she would not pass out again, and wondered about internal injuries.

"I feel wretched," she said, and lay still, staring at the sky.

He left her and began working his way downward, making a trail of sorts and testing loose rocks that led to solid ledges or slopes down which they might slide or walk. When he came back she was sitting up.

"I suppose you wonder how I happened to show up here?" she said.

"Yes, I do, but we won't go into that now," he replied. "I'd like to get you down to that cabin before dark. You're in no shape to spend the night in the open without food or blankets."

He helped her to her feet and things began to swim before her eyes. She pressed her hand against them and breathed deeply.

"Can you make it now?" he asked.

"I'll try," she told him.

He supported her when he could, but there were narrow stretches when she had to walk alone. At such times he roped her securely and paid out the lariats a few inches at a time as she

worked over to a safe spot. Invariably she sat down as if all strength had suddenly left her legs.

VI

IN THE space of a half-hour Ron had to lower Betty down three steep places, then make his own way down by digging in with hands and feet. Sometimes he wore his boots, at other times his bare feet clawed at bad slopes.

The girl began crying softly.

"I'm yellow," she sobbed. "Just plain yellow. Going along the ragged edge of nothing drains courage and physical strength. Leave me here. If you try to make it down after dark you'll break your neck."

"If I'd have taken the beating that you have, Betty," he assured her, "I'd have collapsed long ago. For a moment it looked as if your horse was going to take you over a cliff. The next you were clawing your way along a sloping rock, barely missing a big drop. When you finally had to drop, you were knocked cold. On top of that you've had to climb down a mountain that could make a nervous wreck out of a mountain goat."

Ron picked her up and began walking, sliding, and jumping. He took some long chances, hoping that his guardian angel would keep his feet from slipping.

Most of the time Betty's eyes were closed, her body was limp and often she shook from nervous reaction. But at last they reached the cabin. "Here we are," he said. "The place isn't too clean, but the blankets are. I washed them when I was here." He sat her in a chair, got dry hay and spread it on one of the bunks, then he made up a bed and helped her into it.

"I'll get you something hot," he said. "Soup. Then tea. There's plenty of grub in tin cans around here."

She drank what he gave her and fell into such a heavy sleep that he had an idea she was unconscious some of the time. He was out at daybreak cutting down trees which he cut into the right lengths for a raft and dragged to the creek. It was his plan to float the logs down to the main river and build the raft there.

When he heard Betty moving about Ron returned to the cabin, stirred up a fire in the sheet iron stove and heated water. "There you are," he said, "if you feel up to it. We slid down several muddy spots to get here."

"I think I can manage," she said, and he went back to the wood pile.

When he came in again he asked, "How do you feel?"

"I feel—sick," she answered, "though apparently I wasn't much injured. No cuts or bruises except on my arms and legs. I can draw a deep breath so my ribs are not fractured."

"Any sore spots on your head?"

"No," she said. "I just feel wretched. Everything I do takes special strength."

"You went through a lot on nerve," Ron said. "You almost cracked a couple of times, but you didn't." He regarded her anxiously. "Do you want to sleep some more?"

"No."

"Do you want to be left strictly alone?"

"No," she said. "Let's talk."

"How did you happen to be riding so far from home?" he asked.

"I was told that you might be planning to drive sheep over Box B property," she said, "so I kept an eye on things. I thought you might not start your prowling until later, but yesterday morning when I rode along the fence looking for tracks, I found them. I followed, discovered your dry camp, then your horse. I was just entering that split between the rocks when someone shot at me. I heard the bullet hit my horse, and he bolted. You know the rest. I'm rather hazy on some points."

"You never lost your head," Ron said. "You did some of the fastest thinking on record, too. If you'd made one mistake you'd have been a goner. You guessed right. I *was* looking for a way out of Sheep Valley."

"And didn't find it?"

"It could be done," he said, "if a man wanted to spend the money. The sheep would make it over some of the rough stuff that gave us trouble. We'd have

to have permission to cross your range, though."

"I owe you my life, of course," she said, "because I'd never made it down alone, and I'd have died. But does that change the situation between us?"

"No," he answered. "But here's something that you can think about. It will give you an idea that more than the Box B is involved. Twice I've been shot at. Each time someone, and I've no idea who it is, killed the man who was trying to kill me. The first man who tried to drygulch me was Franzen. The second man is wedged between rocks, up there on the mountain. He's likely to be there until the sheriff hears about it. No friend of his is going to risk trying to bring out the body."

RON gave her some more soup and went outside to work. He thought she was asleep when he looked in on her in the middle of the morning, but she stared at him with unseeing eyes and said, "But, Mother, can't you see that the bank can't keep on advancing more money? We're mortaged to the limit now. If the price of cattle rises, we'll get a breathing spell, and can hang on a while longer."

She dropped back wearily and Ron quietly left the room.

"Out of her head," he thought, "and spilling things you couldn't get out of her with a team of horses if she was in her right mind."

He lit a cigarette and smoked half of it, remembering that he must conserve them.

"One thing about folks like the Ballards," he mused. "They're true to their traditions. They may freeze you with a glance, and make it plain that you come from a lower cut of humanity, but when they're on the skids they don't whine. Huh! The country needs the Ballards, the Cal Lawrences, and the Ed Davises. Fighting against each other has weakened them, but it's also made them strong. What a team they'd make pulling together."

Ron was dragging raft logs to the creek when Betty came out of the cabin.

"I'm going to buy a pair of overalls, Mother," she said, "and I'm going to ride Western fashion. The finishing school way may have been all right when we had money, but I think it's high time that I got down to earth. Sorry, Mother."

"That settles it," Ron said, to himself. "She's in no shape for the drenching she'd get if we raft our way to Little River. And I can't leave her and get help." He had thought some of rafting it alone, sending the doctor from Red Coulee to the Diablo Canyon ranch where Cal Lawrence could raft the doctor downstream to Sheep Valley.

Ron took Betty's arm and led her back to the cabin.

"I don't care what the coroner's jury decided!" she cried angrily. "Ed Davis killed Dad. He said he was going to, didn't he? He drygulched Dad. He was afraid to meet him in the open." The girl was breathing hard with anger, because the moment she was reliving was very real.

"Ron Davis," she suddenly demanded. "what are you doing with me?" She turned on him in sudden fury, kicking and striking.

"Betty!" he shouted. "Get hold of yourself!"

Her fist smashed his lips against his teeth. She kicked him in the stomach and he staggered back. Then he pinned her arms to her sides and swung her off her feet.

He carried her inside, tied her to the bunk and stepped back, wondering what to do next.

"I've been knocking around getting an education," he said, "but I overlooked one subject I could sure use about now—nursing."

"Don't go, Mr. Tremper," she said. "I don't need to think it over. We do need a man, and your Buck Young sounds like an answer to a prayer. If you can run things until he is available, we'll be happy." Then she began talking about her school days.

Ron put in one of the liveliest days of his life, and when darkness came he was all in.

"And no night nurse to take over," he grumbled.

He wrapped himself in a blanket and sat beside her bunk all night, awakening frequently to calm her.

"Have you a cold?" Betty's voice awakened him.

He blinked and looked at her. "What?" he said.

"I asked if you had a cold," she said. "You sit here all wrapped up in a blanket."

"I've been riding herd on you," he answered. "You've been taking walks, telling me the story of your life, talking to people who aren't around here and—"

"Did I give you that shiner and those puffed lips?" she asked.

"If you didn't," he answered, grinning, "I tried to beat myself to death during the night."

"I'm terribly sorry, Ron," she said.

"It wasn't your fault," he answered. "You've been under a long nervous strain, then you get a bad fall. When you grew a little wild I tried to keep you from wandering off or hurting yourself and you fought back."

She was quiet a long time, then asked, "What did I tell you?"

"Nothing that you can be hanged for," he answered. "I suppose I might as well get breakfast."

He started the fire and put over the teakettle, then went down to the creek and washed up. . . .

THE seventh day Ron and Betty walked down to the river.

"That's the only way out," he said. The stream was leaping over boulders, tossing off whitecaps and throwing spray into the air. Further down the white water moving back and forth reminded Betty of a white horse's tail in fly time.

"What do you think?" Ron asked. "Shall we run it?"

"Doesn't it ever get any lower?"

"Yes. That's how the sheep got in here. But we might have to wait a hundred years for it to get that low. There's a slim chance that Cal Lawrence might show up. He was supposed to bring some equipment down here."

She brightened. "I'd say that was a good chance."

"No," he said. "I imagine he's out looking for me. And there's quite a hunt on for you about now. My horse will have returned. Yours never will. Then there's a third missing party—the man who took a pot shot at me. They'll know we didn't elope, so that'll make a pair of hunting parties, each eyeing the other with suspicion. There's excitement in Red Coulee today."

"Mother must be nearly crazy," Betty sighed.

"Yes. I've been thinking about her. Lord knows, she never was a friend of mine, but I don't wish her bad luck." He sat down on the bank and looked at the water. "Once you start, there's no turning back, Betty."

"As long as I can remember," she said, "I've been protected, been turned back when there was the slightest danger. It isn't the way to bring up a Western girl."

"It isn't the way to bring up any girl," Ron said, "unless you're going to keep her for a pet." He did a little mental sparring before saying, "Why can't we pull together, Betty? I've always wanted to get along with you. Maybe you'll laugh, but I used to dream about going into the world, making a million dollars, and coming back and riding away with you on a snorting charger. If a couple of dozen fighters blocked the way, so much the better. When I grew older my dreams took a less dramatic turn. But the main idea was to grow into the kind of man your sort of girl would be proud of. It was a shock to return and find the situation clouded by your father's death."

He waited for some comment from the girl, and there being none, he continued, "When you were out of your head you talked a lot. I'm no eavesdropper, but I couldn't leave you the way things were going. You're having it tough, and you've turned to Trig Tremper. My guess is that he approached you. Isn't that right?"

"Go on," she said.

"Here's my guess, and it's only a guess. Someone has stirred up trouble between the sheepmen and cattlemen

for their own purpose. That isn't hard to do, because their interests clash. I don't think my uncle shot your father. If you'd give me time, I'd prove it, I'm sure."

"It might help," she suggested, "if you'd name the man or men who expect to profit by stirring up trouble."

"It would certainly help," he agreed, "but I'm not that far along. Will you let me drive my Sheep Valley flocks over your range? Naturally I'll pay you for what they eat, and I'll agree to hurry them on."

"No," she answered, "I won't. And if you try to fight your way through you're going to move into a pile of trouble. A Davis is a Davis and a Ballard is a Ballard and they will never meet on common ground."

"At least we know where we stand," he said. "It could be that one of the two men who tried to shoot me shot your father."

"Possibly," she agreed, "and it could be that my father was shot by your guardian angel."

He followed her back to the cabin. It was getting dark in the canyon and valley, but sunlight drenched the upper ridges and peaks. Ron was studying the upper country, as usual, when something high up caught the sunlight and flashed it into his eyes. It came again, and he fixed the spot. He could see a man's head and shoulders, and it looked as if the man's elbows pointed away from his body.

"That's the position of a man using binoculars," Ron said to himself. "Someone knows we're alive and down here. I wonder who it is?" He started to tell Betty, then changed his mind. "I've told her enough for one day."

AFTER the evening meal she stepped outside and looked at the stars, leaving Ron to look through several ancient magazines that smelled of dampness. She had evidently met a problem while she was outside because when she returned she said:

"I hope you won't feel that I'm ungrateful for all that you've done?"

"I think we went into that a while back," he said. "You'd do as much for me. That leaves us even. And we're still going to fight it out. At least enemies may respect each other, and use sportsmanship. I know, for example, that you're broke. That gives me an advantage. I'm broke, too. I'm not bringing a lot of money to the sheepmen. All that I'm bringing is a thousand dollars, a silver-mounted saddle and myself. I hope it's enough." He didn't smile. "Now we're even-Steven."

Ron slept soundly, and awakened at dawn, went down to the river and began building the raft. When he thought that Betty was up he returned and found breakfast ready. They worked together that morning, saying little, but accomplishing a lot. Spikes, his lariats, rope and pieces of haywire that he found around the camp all went into the raft. He hewed a rough paddle with the ax that night.

"Suppose we hit the hay early," he said, "and start the first thing in the morning."

"It sounds like a good idea," she agreed.

Ron awakened at daybreak from habit. He looked over at her bunk and it was empty.

"She's an early bird," he thought.

He dressed, built a fire, then stepped outside and yelled, "Betty! Hey—Betty!" There was no answer. "Has she gone out of her head again and wandered off?" he exploded. He hurried to her bunk and felt the blankets. They were still warm. She hadn't been gone long. He went outside and yelled again. The nearby cliff echoed: "Betty! Betty!"

He ran downstream a hundred yards where a patch of grass reached almost to the water's edge. Her footprints in the fresh dew led toward Diablo River. He got there just in time to see her shove the raft into the water.

"You little fool!" he yelled. "You'll drown yourself! Hold it, and I'll be with you. Drive the paddle into the bottom and hold it. I'll swim!"

He flung himself into the stream, but she merely waved the paddle and let the current take her into the fast water.

Ron swam to the bank and crawled out. "Huh!" he grunted. "Another unanswered question. Is she out of her head, or getting the jump on me?"

VII

THERE was only one thing to do—make another raft.

"But what of?" Ron asked himself.

He supposed he could kill sheep, make ropes from their hides, and construct something that might stay together. As for Betty—she was just a chump. She didn't have one chance in a hundred of making it through to Little River.

Ron was cutting trees a couple of days later when a familiar voice yelled, "Turn a little more steam on that axe!"

Ron whirled. "Cal! Man alive! I'm glad to see you."

"Where's Betty Ballard?"

"How'd you know she'd been here?" Ron asked. "How'd you know I was here?"

"Your horse showed up at Bar D, and when you didn't show up the punchers started asking questions. One of them rode out to camp and told me you'd vanished. Knowing you were trying to find a trail into Sheep Valley it looked bad. Some Ballard puncher might have taken a shot at you. Being a sheepman, you're fair game, particularly on cattle range. I was getting things organized that night when the blamedest thing happened."

"What was it?"

"The dogs barked," Cal said, "and we didn't pay much attention until an hour later then one of the boys went out to the pump and there was a note tied to the handle. It was printed in pencil so you couldn't recognize the handwriting. It said that Betty and you were in Sheep Valley and that I'd better get you out. Shucks, I didn't know she was missing. I figgered you two might get acquainted if you were left alone, and some agreement might come of it. So I took my time building the raft. A couple of days ago trouble hit the sheep country. Cattlemen, armed to the teeth, ran wild, accusing sheepmen of stealing Betty."

"Didn't you tell them about the note and that she was with me?"

"No," Cal replied, "I didn't want to get you into a jackpot. It looked to me as if someone had set a trap for you to fall into. Trouble's popping for fair. Where is Betty?"

"She swiped the raft I built and went downstream!"

"Alone?" Cal was amazed.

"Unless someone got aboard around the bend she was alone," Ron said glumly. "And giving me the laugh at that. I hesitated to take a raft down myself. I'm not a white water man. I never dreamed she'd do anything as crazy."

"That's bad, Ron," Cal said. "Suppose she drowns? You don't find bodies in the Diablo. They jam under rocks. No one in a thousand years will believe that she swiped your raft and tackled it alone. You're going to be asked some pointed questions."

The seriousness of this dawned on Ron. "I hope my guardian angel gets on the job again," he said. "And he better be good this time."

"You don't suppose he was the one who left the note?" Cal suggested. "And if so, what's his game?"

"Suppose we stop speculating," Cal said, "and get down the river? We might find Betty roosting on a rock."

Ron and Cal looked for signs of either the girl or wreckage of the raft all of the way downstream.

"She must've made it," Cal said when they landed at Little River. "But I don't see the raft anywhere."

"She might have stranded a half-mile upstream," Ron said, "then made her way along the bank. The raft might have floated again and gone downstream."

That seemed logical to Cal Lawrence. Seven times out of ten he had stranded and had spent time and effort refloating the raft in order to finish the run to Little River.

They landed and made their way to the depot. "Have you sold a damp girl a ticket to Red Coulee recently?" Ron asked.

"Nope," the ticket agent answered, "I haven't even sold a ticket to a dry

girl . . . Hello, Lawrence. You're coming down the river often these days. If this keeps up we'll have to run a spur line up the Diablo to take care of the traffic."

"That would suit me," Ron said. "I've a bunch of sheep up there I'd like to ship out."

They bought their tickets and went to a sunny spot to dry out.

"She didn't make it through," Cal said. "What had we better do? Report it to the deputy here, or wait till we get to Red Coulee and tell Sheriff Nat Burns himself?"

"A report should be made," Ron said, "but I don't want to be held for investigation. That would be playing into Tremper's hands. This is the logical place to report. If we failed to make one it would look bad. She might have boarded the train without buying a ticket. Or she could be in Little River with friends, not wanting to be seen in public.

"She'd sure be a mess when that river got through with her—clothes wet and even dirty, hair in wet strings, boots full of water," Cal said. "Well, here comes our train. Let's find a seat in the smoker near the stove."

CAL did a little serious thinking during the trip to Red Coulee. "Ron," he said as they were nearing the station, "you said someone was watching you through binoculars. We'll say it was Tremper, though it could've been your guardian angel. If Tremper, he's all set to ask questions about Betty."

"I've been turning that angel over in my mind," Ron said. He could almost hear Tremper saying, "Davis, she was in the valley with you, so why didn't you bring her out? What happened? You don't expect any reasonable man to believe she stole the raft and tackled Diablo River by herself?" And any reasonable man would answer, "No."

"Suppose, Cal, that we gamble on Tremper?" Ron said. "If he makes a move now, it'll show just how far he's gone into this business."

"You're the one who can be thrown into jail, not me," Cal answered, "and this is a business where no one can play it safe."

As they stepped from the train it was evident that someone had telegraphed Tremper that they were arriving. He made a fine show of looking for someone else, but nodded at Ron, when he should have expressed surprise at his return. As they made their way to the livery stable Sheriff Burns crossed over.

"Davis," he said, "I'd like a report on you."

"I was going to report to your deputy at Little River, but the train came along and we had to take it," Ron answered. Then, with Cal as a witness, he related exactly what had happened. "If you want further details," he concluded, "I'll be either at the Diablo Ranch, the Bar D, or the hotel."

The sheriff seemed undecided and Ron walked on to the livery stable. He and Cal rode to the Diablo Ranch, stopping only a few minutes at Bar D where Ron picked up his own horse, Steve.

"Plenty of excitement hereabouts when that horse showed up," Porky, the man-mountain superintendent, said. "Plenty more when Betty Ballard disappeared. We sent out a searching party like everybody else done. The cattlemen was hunting Betty and the sheepmen was hunting you. The Bar D was hunting both."

Ron sensed something back of all this. "Let's have the rest of it, Porky," he urged.

"A while back I said to Webb, 'There's a sheep-cattle ruckus in the wind. Ron Davis is on the sheep side this time. Which side is Bar D on?' And Webb says, 'Porky, an estate doesn't fight in a range war. I'd look nice galloping about with six-guns blazing. And you can't imagine the Red Coulee State Bank stampeding sheep over a cliff.' "

"Good news," Cal said. "There'll be one less outfit on our necks."

A sheepman rode into the camp an hour after Ron and Cal arrived.

"You two was follered from as far as I could see to a couple miles this side of cattle country bobwire," he reported. "Then the rider turns back. I figger he's

hidin' out in a draw. Shall I go down and dust him with a forty-five-seventy rifle slug?"

"No," Ron answered, "but keep an eye on him and let us know what goes on."

The sheepman looked at Cal for confirmation. "He's boss, Joe," Cal said.

"I heard that he'd throwed in with us, but didn't know he was boss. I'll take orders from him, Cal, if that's the way you want it. It'd come easier, though, if Ron Davis was a lifelong sheepman." Joe's ingrained suspicion was hard to overcome.

The following day Ron and Cal started for the headwaters of Diablo River. It looked to him as if most of the sheepmen in the country had gathered there. An old-timer far too ancient to do much physical work sat on a stump giving directions to men who were building a barge. He was the jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none type, and as a younger man had worked in a shipyard for a year.

"I tell yuh," he kept repeating to anyone who would listen, "them planks ain't heavy enough to take a batterin' agin rocks. We ain't got corkin' for the seams."

"What's the matter with tar?" Cal asked.

"Tar won't stand up under no strain," the old fellow explained. "It can be knocked off. Corkin', now, is wedged in tight. I'm just warnin' you. I don't want to be blamed when the whole business sinks. Cuttin' up them tin cans and nailin' strips over the seams might help, but the first good smash will rip off the tin." He spat a stream of tobacco juice toward a pile of five-gallon oil tins.

"We can only do our best," Ron said.

LONG before the barge was finished the wool clip from back-country range arrived on pack trains, and one herder drove his flocks to the surrounding hills and clipped within sight of the barge.

"That fellow would haze a deer to his cabin before shooting it to save packing in the meat," Cal observed, with a trace of admiration. "He's always been that way."

The wool was baled and piled up at the edge of a pool. Several days after the last bale was brought in, Ron incorporated some ideas of his own in the barge. The old-timer chuckled as he watched Ron and the others finish the job.

Launching was no trick at all. They sawed off a couple of blocks that held the barge and it slipped along over rollers into the pool. Forward and aft were windlasses such as miners use over deep shafts. They were of heavier construction, however, and had handles on both ends of the roller. There were bow and stern sweeps to help steer the craft, then amidships were racks containing five-gallon cans, with the tops cut out, filled with water. The bales of wool were taken aboard and lashed, then with a rope running to a nearby rock the barge was windlassed into the current.

The barge struck a bar almost immediately, turned and jolted its way downstream. There was neither bow nor stern in the accepted sense. Whichever end was downstream and had a sweep on it was the bow for the moment.

A half-mile from the Diablo River ranch camp ,the barge piled up on a bar. A line carried ashore and a little work on the windlass freed them.

"I'm beginning to hope," Cal said. "The real test is the stretch below the Sheep Creek camp, though."

They ran the barge into a pool near the camp and tied it up to a boulder.

"This is enough for one day," Ron said. "We all need a good night's rest. Tomorrow we'll see if we can throw her ashore near Sheep Creek."

"That's going to be a tough one," Cal predicted. "The current from Sheep Creep tends to throw a raft across the stream. A raft rides high and can be handled. This barge rides deep, and the current can get a real hold on it."

At daybreak they placed planks from the barge to the bank and with much swearing and grunting forced two reluctant horses aboard.

"Until they saw the barge and guessed what was up," Ron said, "I put

them down as a couple of plugs, good only for pulling farm machinery around, but they showed more fight and spirit than an outlaw horse at a rodeo."

"We'd better throw 'em and lash 'em," Cal suggested. "They'll ride better that way. If they're standing, and we hit a rock, and we're going to hit rocks, they'll be knocked flat and might break a leg."

The horses were thrown and lashed. They lay on the barge, eyes rolling and seemed to be asking, "What's going on here, anyway?"

The men carried the machinery aboard and lashed it, then Cal tied a small raft astern. "If this big barge goes to pieces," he said, "we may have to take to the life boats. That raft is our life boat. . . . Well, I guess we're ready."

The men selected for the one-way trip downstream were the youngest and strongest among the sheepmen. From the start it was a dizzy trip. They managed to avoid most rocks, but again and again the front end struck sand bars, then the water piled up. Pulling hard on the sweep they'd swing the after end around, and the current would do the rest.

"Sheep Creek is ahead!" Cal yelled. "Head her in toward the bank. Pull hard on that bow sweep. Get her head in. Harder!"

Men strained until the cords stood out in their necks and perspiration coursed down their faces. White water seethed as they forced the barge over. Five hundred yards above the creek, the barge struck a bar, slid almost over and stopped.

"Lighten the load," Rod directed.

"It's a good thing we were riding deep," Cal said. "Look at the bar we'd have struck if we hadn't hit this. Get a line ashore while we're lightening the load." Ron roped a snag on the bank, fastened a line around his waist and jumped overboard, hauling himself through the water hand over hand on the lariat.

He planted his feet on the bank and hauled a heavier line ashore and secured it to a boulder. Those aboard, working the windlass, could now put pressure on the barge. Others were emptying the five-gallon tins of water to lighten the load. When the last spilled over the side, the barge was still aground.

"How good are you with a lariat?" Cal asked. "Could you rope a swimming horse?"

"If I couldn't I'd quit the range and get a job pushing a pencil somewhere," Ron answered.

"This job will take some doing," Cal predicted. "I'll send one of the boys to help you. He'll pick you up with the raft."

AS THE raft went by, Ron jumped aboard. Under Cal's directions, the man landed the raft above Sheep Creek. A few minutes later the first horse was shoved overboard. With a rope about his waist Ron waded into the stream until he was hip deep. The man, holding a second lariat kept Ron from being swept off his feet.

The horse's head and neck were well above the water one moment, then as the animal came to a rougher place the water pulled it under, and the head almost disappeared. Ron understood now what Cal meant when he'd asked if he could rope. He would get two chances at most, then the horse would be swept beyond reach.

The head disappeared just as the loop dropped. Ron recoiled his lariat hastily, and tried again. This time the head was high. The man on the bank hauled away, then as soon as Ron's feet were on solid ground the two of them pulled the horse from the current. It snorted and shook itself, glad to be out of it all.

As soon as it was freed of the loop, the second horse was thrown into the stream. Ron had learned the trick, and this animal was handled without trouble. The men on the windlass hauled the lightened barge clear and it began drifting again. A man on the bank yanked the line off the snag, and men aboard coiled it up. As the barge neared Ron, Cal bellowed:

"Take a line and secure it to something!"

Again it was a situation where a first

or second try must succeed. A light line came at them and again the heavier line was hauled ashore. The two men, stumbling over boulders, carried the loop to a stump, then ran downstream and ducked behind boulders in case the rope broke.

The stump came out by the roots and began bouncing among downstream boulders. Cal saw two roots, sticking out like a steer's horns, and he grabbed them, riding the stump until it lodged between two large boulders.

The barge swung inshore, two hundred feet above Sheep Creek. Cal leaped ashore.

"Ron, that was a close call. We almost kept going downstream." He mopped his brow. "There are easier ways of getting wool to market," he said.

"But not for us," Ron answered. "I suppose the first thing on the program is to clip and bale enough wool to complete the barge load?"

"That's the idea, men," Cal said to the others. "And make a job of it. The more wool we have the more money to fight this battle through to a finish. Ron and I'll secure the barge and get the machinery to the bank. Then we'll fill the cans with water. We're sure to go aground again."

"This pioneering a barge business on the Diablo River is quite a job," Ron said. "If a sheep-cattle war didn't hang in the balance I'd enjoy it more, though." He glanced at the mountains. "I suppose Trig Tremper has men watching us."

"My guess is that Trig Tremper is doing the watching personally," Cal answered, and Ron nodded in agreement.

At that moment Tremper, on a high ridge, was watching the activity. Powerful binoculars brought the scene almost within reach. He could identify Ron and Cal, and was sure many of the others were sheepmen he had seen in town.

"Quite an idea," he mused. "They've given up driving the sheep out of the valley and are counting on the wool clip. The price of wool is high this year. Hmmm. It's time I played a hand just to make the game interesting. Hmmm. Chances are that barge will strike boulders and sink before it ever reaches Little River, but I'd better make sure of it. Atwood's the man for the job—Atwood can handle a canoe in white water."

VIII

ATWOOD was one of Trig Tremper's gun crew, but he had other qualifications. Now as he set out on the job for Tremper his tools consisted of a sawed-off shotgun loaded with buckshot to discourage anyone from getting too close to him and preventing him from finishing his work; an auger with a wide bit; several thin wooden strips, and some nails.

Investigation having disclosed the fact everyone at the Diablo River camp was either downstream helping Ron at Sheep Creek, or herding the nearby flocks, Tremper's men drove up with a buckboard shortly after dusk and unloaded a canoe. They carried it down to the stream, stowed Atwood's gear aboard, and hastily left.

Atwood stowed everything forward, then covered the canoe from the bow to a point near the stern with a canvas. This kept water from spilling aboard and sinking the canoe. In the stern, also, he carried two picks lashed together. These would serve as an anchor should he want to stop suddenly.

It was dark when he started downstream, but white water gave him a fair idea of the channel. Several times he dragged the picks to check his course, and twice he rested for fifteen minutes. He wanted to be fresh when he arrived.

Water, piling up against the barge and running along the side, created a white streak. He swung toward it, dropped his picks, and listened. There was no one aboard. It was larger than he thought, and could carry a big load.

"But what of it?" he asked himself. "Water will sink the biggest of 'em if you get enough of it inside."

He bored holes close together just below the waterline. As fast as he finished one he plugged it with rags and went on to the next. When a row as long as his

wooden strips was finished, he pulled the rags from the holes and nailed the strip over them. None of the nails was driven clear in. As soon as the strips scraped against a rock, or even a sand bar, they would be torn off.

At three in the morning he finished his work, dropped downstream a half-mile and waited for daylight. He cached his canoe a short distance above Little River, and sauntered into town, well pleased with his night's work.

"I'd like to stick around," he thought, "and watch that bargeload of wool sink, but there's no telling where it'll happen." He decided to take the next train. "Might just as well collect from Trig and celebrate." He laughed shortly. "I'm the only one of the last three Trig sent out who's lived to celebrate. Wonder who got Franzen and Cronk. Couldn't have been Ron Davis. Both times it was a drygulching, where Ron wasn't supposed to have a chance."

Atwood found a saloon and bought himself a drink and cigar. The smell of printer's ink reached his nostrils and he saw a pile of Little River *Messengers* on the bar. It was a four-page weekly —one of those rangeland papers that are published because an editor is more interested in his work than in making a lot of money.

Two columns were devoted to the Betty Ballard disappearance. The sheriff, according to the article, had concluded that the girl had been killed. Her mother was in a collapse. Arrests were predicted with confidence.

On another page was an editorial stating that it was high time that the better element among the sheepmen and cattlemen get together and work out some plan that would be mutually beneficial. It concluded with the statement that lawlessness, which had slumbered for a number of years in the Diablo River country had broken out anew.

The editorial invited the reader to look at two news stories, which might, or might not have a connection. The first was a rehash of Franzen's death as reported by Ron Davis and Cal Lawrence. The second related how searchers had found Cronk, wedged between rocks in the high mountains, his rifle shattered on rocks hundreds of feet below.

"It'll take only a couple more killings for the pot to boil over," Atwood reflected. "And there'll be a couple more. Ron Davis for one. Maybe Cal Lawrence. Maybe Trig Tremper will get himself killed this time." He shook his head. "No, Trig's never around when lead flies. Trig's smart."

He ordered another drink to quiet an odd uneasiness, then headed for the railroad station.

WHEN his train pulled into Red Coulee, Trig Tremper was on hand.

"You did the job?" he asked, and Atwood nodded. "Did you have any trouble?"

"No," Atwood replied. "Everyone was too busy clipping wool. I could see the glow of a big campfire and hear sheep bleating in the distance."

"Why didn't you cut the barge loose and let it drift downstream?"

"They'd stranded it," Atwood explained. "Between Ron Davis' brains and Cal Lawrence's experience with sheep and the river they don't make many mistakes. I'll draw down my money if it's right with you?"

"Come over to the hotel," Trig Tremper said.

On the way over Atwood asked, "Have you any idea about this Ballard girl's disappearance?"

"Why should I?"

"You generally know what's going on," Atwood explained. He was easily the most intelligent of the men Tremper hired and made it a practice to know as much as possible about his employer. "I hear the old lady is taking her daughter's disappearance hard."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"On the train," Atwood said. "A couple of whisky drummers were talking. Plenty of people are getting interested in this set-up. First, there's Ed Davis' will, giving Ron seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of sheep if he manages the ranch at a ten per cent profit; then there was the mysterious killings of Franzen and Cronk, then—"

"I know—I know," Tremper cut in impatiently. "But I don't know who killed those two men. I've got to find out. How about you taking over that job?"

"Trig," Atwood said, "I'm fair to middling at blowing a safe, starting a riot, or boring holes in barges, and I'm a good man in white water, but when it comes to running down an unknown killer—that's out of my line."

"Well, hang around, anyway," Trig advised. "You may be needed to start a riot. We may want Ron Davis taken from jail and hanged."

"Ron Davis ain't in jail," Atwood said.

"He's going to be—if he isn't drowned in the Diablo River," Tremper predicted.

Nothing more was said until they arrived at Tremper's room where he paid Atwood, then he said:

"About where do you think that barge will go down? I'd like to see it sink."

"Your best chance is at Green Point," Atwood answered. "You get a good view upstream and down from there. There'll be enough water in the barge to make her hard to manage by the time it arrives there. It might even smash into the cliffs. The river makes a turn, and driftwood is thrown against the cliffs by the current."

"Green Point," Tremper repeated. "Isn't that where Franzen was shot?"

"No, he was roosting in the rimrock directly across the river," Atwood said. "The cliffs where the barge should strike are directly below. From Green Point you can't miss a thing."

"I think I'll look into it," Tremper said.

Atwood's eyes grew narrow with craft. "Take a rifle along, and make like you intend to pick off Ron Davis," he suggested.

"And get what Franzen and Cronk got?"

"No," Atwood said. "Franzen and Cronk weren't shot at until they opened up on Davis. You're safe as long as you don't start aiming. Now, suppose you have Big Pete and Little Pete hiding out in the rocks a half mile behind you, so that they can cover all approaches. Then they'll find out who is doing the killing. I'm telling you, Trig, if you don't find out pronto you're going to have a hard time getting the boys to do your gunning. They are not going to risk getting killed."

Trig Tremper saw the logic of this, but he didn't relish being a live decoy. Again, empty cartridge shells proved that both Franzen and Cronk had fired more than once before the man or men who killed them had gone into action. Atwood was right, too, in saying it would be hard to hire gunmen unless this was cleared up. Dead gunmen aren't much good to themselves or to anyone else.

"Big Pete" and "Little Pete" were reliable. They would take care of anyone who might stalk him, Tremper knew. Finally, Ron Davis' unknown guardian would be interested in watching the barge.

"Mrs. Ballard has turned everything over to me to manage," Tremper said. "I think I'll spend a few days at the ranch."

"Good idea," Atwood said. "You can ride out to Green Point and nobody will be the wiser. Each night you can ride back to the ranch for a good night's sleep. One thing is certain, they won't try to take that bargeload of wool downstream at night. If you watch from dawn to sundown every day, you can't miss the show. But Big Pete and Little Pete better take their places above Green Point and stay there. Three people riding back and forth might be noticed."

TREMPER drew five twenty-dollar gold pieces from his pocket and handed them to Atwood.

"Thanks for the idea," he said. "It's worth a hundred dollars. If you have more bright thoughts, let me know. There's always money in the poke, you know."

Big Pete and Little Pete were not related. Each had a killing to his credit and was inclined to be cocky. Each weighed a hundred and sixty pounds, was swarthy, and lacked his employer's

love of elegance. Big Pete was four inches taller than his companion.

They followed Tremper from the Box B, at a respectable distance, separated and made a thorough search of the country back of Green Point. Big Pete picked a spot that he would take if he intended drygulching anyone on the point. Little Pete did the same. Each was confident that Ron Davis' guardian angel would take up a position at one of the likely spots. They, in turn, made themselves comfortable within rifle range.

Tremper rode out to the point, which was actually a short bend in the river. Great heaps of rimrock covered the area, but a couple of hundred yards' walk gave him an upstream or downstream view, and of the cliffs across the stream. It was seven hundred yards across the canyon at this point.

Something caught the man's attention. He got down on his knees and examined the rocks.

"Powder marks!" he exclaimed. "Someone rested a rifle on this rock, and fired. The powder burned this rock. The man who killed Franzen did the job right here!"

He looked around for an empty cartridge shell, but failed to find one.

"Smart enough not to leave evidence around," he muttered.

He worked his way along the canyon rim nearly two miles, then crossed through rough country to another bend. Far upstream he could see Ron Davis and his men loading the barge.

"About day after tomorrow," Tremper concluded, "the showdown will be on." He laughed, remembering two wool buyers who had hurried to Little River to buy the load. "They'd better stretch a net across the river and catch the bales as they float down."

Ron's men were working so hard that Cal Lawrence warned them to ease up. One of the older men shook his head.

"We can't do it, Cal," he explained. "You know how it's been—nothing but hard luck for years. Every time it looked as if we'd have a little good luck, something happened. Every minute counts. We're all scared that something will happen. And we don't want to give it time to happen."

They finished loading one noon, but Ron and Cal told them flatly that they were in no condition to take the barge downstream that night.

"You fellows turn in," Ron ordered, "and we'll call you at five in the morning."

Because they were physically exhausted, everyone slept. It was after six when Ron awakened, and for a moment he wondered where he was. Then snores in various keys told him.

"Cal," he said, shaking him, "wake up!"

"Danged cattlemen!" Cal muttered. "I'm a peaceful cuss by nature. I believe in live and let live, but you can't crowd me. Now these cattlemen—"

"Them's fightin' words, brother," Ron said. "I'm a cattleman. Put up or shut up."

Cal began groping for his gun and Ron roared with laughter.

Cal looked foolish. "Must've been talking in my sleep," he grumbled. "Fine hour to get a man up. What time is it?"

"Six-thirty," Ron answered.

That awakened Cal and he began yelling at the others:

"Everybody out! Are you going to sleep all day?"

By seven-thirty they were windlassing the barge from the bar on which it had rested during the loading. At eight o'clock they were on their way downstream. Within five minutes they struck a rock with enough force to turn the barge toward the opposite bank. They were so busy with the sweeps that no one aboard saw the long, thin wooden strips with bent nails bobbing along on the surface. As Atwood had figured, the first rough contact with a rock had torn them off. Water began pouring in through the series of holes.

The barge developed a list to the right, or starboard side.

"She's sprung a leak," Cal said. "She's hard to handle. We're going to have trouble getting her around the bend."

"Liable to hit the wall?"

"I don't know whether she can take it or not," Cal said. They had bolted on a heavy guard rail to take the initial shock. "That guard rail may smash up. Ron, we're listing on the side that'll hit the cliffs. The whole load may go over."

SHEEP VALLEY had yielded a much higher clip than they had estimated. They had stacked it on, and now the baled wool on the barge loomed up high.

"If you can handle the sweep," Ron said, "I'll see what can be done."

Cal nodded, and Ron called the men together. Part of them were put to work shifting the cans of water to the port, or left side of the barge. The water below the deck shifted so suddenly that one of the men was pitched overboard. He caught a rope and hauled himself aboard.

On the starboard side Ron was lashing ropes to bales of wool and lowering them until they protected the guard rail. The work was almost finished when Cal yelled for help. Water was all around them. The smooth stretch where Franzen had tried to drygulch Ron was behind, and the cliff loomed high.

Everyone got hold of the sweeps and began trying to bring the forward end around, while the current fought just as hard to drive it straight into the cliff.

"If she starts to go over," Ron bellowed, "get on the high side of the barge. You won't have a chance among the bales."

Then the cliff seemed to leap at them, and high above Trig Tremper yelled:

"There it goes! There it goes!"

The baled wool along the guard rail took up most of the shock. Much of the load shifted and some of the top bales broke loose, hit the cliff rebounded to the deck, scattering men. The guard rail splintered in several places, then the barge started for the opposite wall, the upstream end now heading downstream.

"Get hold of the sweeps again!" Cal yelled. "And shift the water ballast. One side is almost under."

They let that side remain the low side, but brought it up some by shifting the cans of water to the center. Cal put the barge on the first bar and gave the men a breathing spell and a chance to reload and relash the bales.

"I think," Ron said, "we've a chance of making it. There're some rocks downstream, but no place where we can be thrown into the cliffs."

"I'll tell you something now," Cal said. I happened to be knocked on my back during the crash, and for a second my eyes were on the cliffs of that green point. Trig Tremper, or his twin brother, was looking down watching the show."

"He saw a good one," Ron said.

"Yes, but not the kind that he wanted to see," Cal said.

IX

CAL was right. It was not the kind of show that Tremper had wanted to see. Nor was it the kind he had expected to see. It seemed incredible that the barge could have withstood the shock. He couldn't see that Ron had added bales of wool to take the shock. He couldn't understand why the barge hadn't gone down. He was hopeful, however, when the last he saw of the barge it was rounding a distant bend, listing heavily, and with the men aboard working frantically.

Tremper remembered Big and Little Pete, stationed to pick up the man who had shot two of his men. He knew where they were, in a general way, but when he signaled neither responded.

"Curse it," he snarled, "they can't be watching me or they'd see my signal!" He walked back to his horse, then rode over to the point where he was certain Little Pete had stood watch.

Little Pete was gone. Undoubtedly he had spent some time there, smoking many cigarettes, and eating a lunch.

"They pulled out," Tremper thought wrathfully. "They'll sweat for this."

He rode as rapidly as possible to Red Coulee where he took the first train for Little River. But that was not until the following morning. He told himself again and again that Ron Davis' barge

couldn't possibly have made it through, but he had to see with his own eyes.

And the first thing he saw when he got there was the barge. Several drays were taking the bales to waiting box cars, and a wool buyer was coming out of the bank with Ron Davis.

The wool buyer was laughing.

"When my competitor and I stood on the bank and saw that barge coming," he said, "he made a twenty-dollar bet that you'd sink before you could beach the barge. I took him. I figured if you'd brought that load this far you'd keep that load from sinking even if you had to get under it with your backs and crawl on your hands and knees."

"Someone tried to sink it," Ron answered. "When we beached her we found a row of holes that let in all the water she'd take."

"What kept her up then?"

Trig Tremper didn't want Ron to catch him eavesdropping, but there were things he had to know. He followed the pair closely.

"I didn't know what might happen to the barge," he heard Ron say, "and I didn't want her to sink. Every camp has plenty of five-gallon oil tins in the tin can dump. Sheep camps are no exception. We soldered up the holes and filled the interior of the barge with cans. She could take on water, but she couldn't sink."

The wool buyer roared with laughter. "Whatever gave you that idea, Davis?"

"The tin can dumps," Ron answered. "Another thing, I've sold the barge. A rancher wants to cut wild hay he knows about and take it downstream ten miles." He shook hands. "It's been nice doing business with you. I'll have to pull out now. The train's due."

The train came in and Ron swung aboard. Trig Tremper hopped a rear car. The sheepmen were in the smoker and he wasn't in any mood to see them.

"I'm leaving too much to other people," he thought angrily. "I've got to take over myself for a while. We've got to build up feeling against the sheepmen, then add fuel to the flames. I think I've an ace in the hole in Mrs. Ballard. Betty is missing, and her mother's grief should make the Red Coulee people fighting mad."

When the train pulled into Red Coulee that evening, Tremper was first man off. With long, determined strides, he went to his hotel. He saw Atwood in the lobby, but postponed the business of taking the man apart for not sinking the barge. To Tremper's way of thinking, Atwood should have known about the tin cans.

The clerk gave him his key and several letters. One carried a printed address and no stamp. Someone had sent it by messenger, or dropped it on the desk. He opened it and read the unsigned note:

Big Pete and Little Pete didn't get me, as you planned. I took care of them. Bound them hand and foot and left them in a cave. They've worked loose by now, but they can't go far in that country without boots or pants.

"What next?" Tremper snarled. "Is that man trying to ridicule me?"

He walked to the window and looked down on the street. Ron Davis was going into Webb's office. The lawyer was up, as late as it was.

TREMPER hurried downstairs and made his way to Webb's office. There was too much light in front so he went around in back, climbed wooden stairs and went down a short hall. He could hear Webb's voice.

"So you got that much for the wool, eh? Good, Ron! Good! The will provides that you must show a ten per cent profit. You're showing fifteen. I guess that gives you a clear title to your sheep ranch. What're you going to do next?"

"Take title," Ron answered, "then put the money into the fight. The sheepmen gambled on me, so I'm staying with them until the trouble is cleared up."

"You'll lose your ranch," Webb reminded him.

"Well, what of it?" Ron answered. "It's only a sheep ranch, isn't it?"

Tremper had heard enough. He made his way to the sheriff's office.

"It's about time you arrested Ron Davis for Betty Ballard's murder, isn't it?" he demanded bluntly.

"Arresting is one thing, proving it is

another," Sheriff Burns answered. "I've been investigating, but haven't turned up much."

"You arrest him," Tremper said. "I'll dig up the evidence."

Then he was gone, but a short distance from the sheriff's office he added to himself, "And if I can't dig up evidence enough to frame him, I'll build up a mob that'll take care of him."

Then he saddled his horse and headed for the mountains and rimrock of the Diablo River country. Big Pete and Little Pete, without boots or pants, must be in a vile mood by this time. . . .

The Little River Bank had given Ron Davis a certified check covering his share of the proceeds from the wool clip. His first impulse was to deposit at the Red Coulee State Bank and draw on the amount as needed.

"That's the wrong move at this stage of the game," he concluded. "Money is my sinews of war. An old trick is to bring a fake damage suit and tie up the bank account."

As soon as the bank was open the day after his return to Red Coulee he cashed the check and carried the money to Webb's office.

"How about leaving it in your office?" he asked. "I'll take all responsibility. I'll get it as I need it. Otherwise I'll have to bury it under some rock."

"You're going to need all of it, and more too," Webb said. "Here comes the sheriff. He asked me if I'd seen you. I told him you dropped in last night and that today I was giving you title to the Diablo River Sheep Ranch." He sighed heavily, as if with the weight of many burdens on his shoulders. "I told him that as a property owner I didn't think you'd light out."

Sheriff Burns came in.

"I'll have to pick you up for killin', Davis," he said. "We don't know what happened, of course, but Tremp—er—witnesses saw Betty Ballard and you in Sheep Valley. You came out alone with a cock and bull story about her stealing your raft. You want us to take it that she was drowned. We think a jury should either clear you or send you to the gallows. I'll take your guns. Turn around—back this way."

Ron permitted himself to be disarmed, then he spoke. "You almost said 'Tremper' a moment ago, Sheriff, then you corrected yourself and spoke of witnesses. Why don't you get into this business with an open mind? Tremper is back of all of this trouble, but he isn't coming into the open. Investigate, Sheriff, and don't be blinded by the man. If you make a serious mistake you're going to look pretty foolish around election time."

"With you hanged, and the killing of Franzen and Cronk cleared up I'm going to look pretty good on election day," Sheriff Nat Burns retorted. "Come along. No need of us chewin' the rag. It don't get us anywheres."

A half hour later the editor of the weekly paper called on Ron Davis for a statement. "Not guilty covers everything," Ron said. How would you like a story about the wool clip? It brought us a nice piece of money."

"I'm not interested in any sheepman's affairs," the editor snorted. "I publish a cattleman's paper."

"I know, the *Cattlemen's Journal.* Why not make it a real Diablo County paper and call it the *Mountain Rancher?*"

"I came here to interview you and not listen to a lecture," the editor said coldly. "You're a traitor to your own kind, if you want to know what I think. For a dirty seventy-five-thousand-dollar sheep ranch you turn your back on cattlemen. Bah! A man who'd do that would kick a dog or kill a girl who learned too much about what he was up to."

"If I were the sort of a man you claim," Ron said, "I'd slap you silly with my open hand. But you're a disgrace to the newspaper business because you want to color the news to suit yourself and not give it to people as it is. I wonder how my Uncle Ed managed to overlook the *Cattlemen's Journal.* He bought a broken-down brick yard, a sheep ranch that was on its last legs, and a no-good mine to will to his heirs. He certainly missed the biggest white ele-

phant in this county."

"I'll twist your tail plenty," the editor said defiantly, "just as soon as I can get to my office."

THE jailer came and took the editor to the door. When he came back he said:

"Davis, you sure go out of your way to make enemies. That's Mike Tweed. People toe the mark when he's around."

"He was biased when he came," Ron answered, "and showed it. You don't suppose I was going to get down on my knees, or kiss his hand, do you?"

"There are lots of folks in these parts who come mighty near to doing just that," the jailer said.

When Ron again saw Tweed the man was accompanied by Trig Tremper, Atwood, Beefy, another of the Tremper rough-and-tumble fighters, and Mrs. Ballard. Several others trailed the party into the jail corridor. Sheriff Burns bustled around as if he had been elected to be Tweed's errand boy.

There was a sanctimonious expression on Tremper's face, and he was gentle with Mrs. Ballard.

"I'm in for it," Ron thought. "Tremper's framing something." It put him in a savage mood, but he couldn't be savage with a woman who was in real distress.

"Ronald," Mrs. Ballard said in a tight voice, "you've never liked me, I know, but—"

It was the other way around, Ron thought, as she hesitated. She had never liked him. He couldn't tell her so, but he said:

"Before I talk to anyone I'd like a word in private with Mike Tweed."

The editor looked amazed, but stepped close to the bars, and waved the others back.

"Tweed," Ron said, "I don't know you, but I think you've set yourself up as a tin god of the range and have half the spineless people in this part of the country fawning before you. But even a tin god can't approve of what is about to take place. Trig Tremper, a yellow so-and-so if ever there was one, is cashing in on Mrs. Ballard's grief to help out his own ideas. He's set the stage. The question is, are you smart enough to see through all this? If you aren't, then I'm in a tough place. That's what I had in mind."

Tweed backed away and the others came up. No one spoke except Mrs. Ballard. She was biting her lip to control her emotion. Ron could see that she felt humbled to make any kind of plea to one of the Davis breed. He had never dreamed that he would see the day when she would be humbling herself, but here it was, and Ron didn't like it. Yet he knew nothing he could say would ease her distress. Tremper had won her completely, and he was the rock on which she was leaning.

"Ronald, where is Betty? If you killed her, tell me and end this hoping. It is driving me mad!"

"Mrs. Ballard, I'll swear on the Bible, or take any oath that anyone can think of, that Betty took the raft and went downstream and left me stranded for reasons of her own," Ron said.

"She wouldn't do it! My little girl wouldn't do anything as mad as that. Oh she wouldn't!" She was breaking now. "Oh, what must I do to make him tell me!"

Ron stood there, white with distress. In all his life he had never felt as helpless.

"You rat!" Beefy roared, genuinely moved. "You should be took out and hung." He was panting with fury.

"Easy, Beefy," Tremper warned. "Remember, we're law-abiding citizens. That sort of thing don't go. This man will be tried, and the truth will come out. I'll dedicate my life to it."

"I wish that I could depend on that, Tremper," Ron said. "It'll be the first thing that you didn't dedicate some other fellow's life to."

"You vile thing!" Mrs. Ballard panted. "You're attacking Mr. Tremper to divert attention from yourself." She caught her breath sharply, then collapsed.

It was not an act. Her suffering had been more than she could endure. There was hate and the urge to destroy in the eyes that Ron faced. The sheriff was

as furious as the others, but for the looks of the thing he said:

"Tremper is right. You men can't take the law into your own hands. Out with you. All of you."

"Why did you let them in in the first place?" Ron shouted. "You don't have to answer! I know. Tremper wanted it that way."

Tremper and Beefy carried Mrs. Ballard outside. The spectators scattered. There were plenty of honest cattlemen and cowpunchers who would burn with indignation when the scene was described to them. And to burn with indignation was to act in the cattleman's code.

They began gathering in small groups, talking angrily.

"I tell you men," one shouted, "we've all been so busy tryin' to scratch out a livin' in these hard times that we've forgotten about our public duty. It's time we looked around and took action."

"And if it wasn't for sheep eatin' up good beef range," another said, "we wouldn't have to scratch so hard to get coffee, flour and sugar. That's about all I've got the past few years, except-in' a little side meat."

MEANWHILE the tide of indignation flamed, and Tremper's men added fuel to the flame by constant reference to Mrs. Ballard's grief.

"They carried her into the sheriff's office," one of them said, "and laid her on the table. She didn't get her senses back for fifteen minutes. Just kind of moaned and called for Betty. We ain't my idea of men if we put up with it."

Around midnight the possible mob began breaking up into small groups. They weren't ready to tear down the jail and stage a hanging bee.

"Well," Tremper said to Atwood and Beefy, "we put it over in fine shape. In another week I'll be the biggest man in these parts. You'll get your cut. . . . What about the Box B hands?" he answered a question from Beefy. "They're a law-abidin' bunch from what you've heard? Well, I've fired them. I told Mrs. Ballard they were selling Box B beef to rustlers. It took time to win her confidence, but now that I've won it, it can't be shaken."

"Can Davis be released on bail?" Beefy asked. "Them sheepmen are in the money."

"Yes, thanks to Atwood's blundering," Tremper said. Atwood turned red, but made no answer. "You can't get bail on a first degree killing charge, and I'm seeing to it that that *is* the charge. . . . Let's go over to the Water-hole and have a drink."

When they arrived Foghorn Carrigan was serving drinks to Big Pete and Little Pete. The pair gave their employer sour glances. Each felt that Tremper might have found them if he had searched a little longer. As it was, they had found him when he had arrived the second time with pants and boots.

They downed their drinks.

"Well Pete and Pete," Foghorn boomed, "shall we repeat—on the house?"

They felt better and grinned.

"And then," Tremper said, "there's one on me for all of the boys."

"Things are goin' to suit him," Foghorn thought. "If I wasn't neutral, and I *am* neutral, I'd side against that cuss. He don't ring true. A Mick like meself can spot a counterfeit, man or money, as far as he can see 'em."

X

BECAUSE it was now midnight, Tremper and his men separated and turned in. Exactly twenty-four hours later, five masked men rode up to the jail and their leader went around to the sheriff's quarters in the rear and knocked on the door. Sheriff Burns appeared, gun in hand.

"Who is it?" he demanded. "Take that mask off."

"If we intended to handle you roughlike, Sheriff," the leader of the five answered, "we wouldn't've come with holstered guns. As we figger it, it'll be better all around if you don't know who we are. Just say a mob got the drop on you."

"What do you want?"

"It ain't what, it's who," the man answered. "We're after a certain low-down sheepman. We figgered gettin' him this way would save the county trial money. Also it'll save the taxpayers buildin' a new jail, because the mob that's fixin' to deal simple justice to this buzzard'll prob'ly wreck the jail. Now to make it look good I'll get the drop on you." He chuckled, drew his gun and shoved it into the sheriff's ribs. "It ain't loaded, but you don't know that, Sheriff. Now you make your part look good."

In fine humor the sheriff protested violently. Once he was in the jail he stiffened his protest until it had a ring of sincerity. There was always the chance that Ron might escape and tell of this.

"Open the cell door," the leader ordered. "Lively!"

The sheriff argued and got a jab in the ribs for his pains, and opened the door.

"Come on out, Davis! Or must we come in and get you."

"I'll come," Ron answered. "I'm outnumbered, so fighting it out wouldn't do any good. The sheriff's lost his nerve."

"He's going to lose your vote," the leader growled. "Where you're goin' they don't elect sheriffs." At the jail door he paused. "Don't spread the alarm too soon, Sheriff, or we'll take care of you later."

"Where're you hangin' him?" the sheriff asked.

"You know that cottonwood on the edge of town?" the leader said. "Well, one of the finest hangin' limbs in the country grows on that tree. "S'long. Get a move on, Davis! You're bein' released without bail."

They led him to a horse and gruffly ordered him to mount. He obeyed and the party rode out of town. Presently the leader commenced to laugh. One man who hadn't spoken a word burst into laughter also.

"Why blast you, Cal!" Ron exclaimed. "I never dreamed—"

"We hated to do it," Cal answered, half-seriously, "but Tremper was firing up a cattleman mob to string you up. There's going to be the devil to pay tomorrow when your body isn't found dangling from that cottonwood limb."

Fresh horses were waiting for Ron and Cal a few miles from town and they rode at a gallop until they were deep in the sheep country.

"How did you learn what was up?" Ron asked.

"We've got friends in town," Cal answered. "They reported that Tremper was building up a lot of bad feeling. It was easy to guess the rest. You'll have to keep under cover a while, but they can't stop you from thinking and planning. We'll carry out your orders. We've raised money."

"Mine's with Webb," Ron said. "I'll give you power of attorney. He'll turn over what you need. Let's get powder, steel, and start drilling in Sheep Valley. Now that the wool clip has been shipped out of the valley Tremper may think we've given up the idea of building a trail."

"You build yourself a raft, load it with grub, and head for Sheep Valley," Cal suggested. "You can cut hay and lay out a trail until we bring in the powder. You'll need a couple of men to do the drilling."

"We can do the blasting when a thunderstorm is on so that it won't attract attention," Ron suggested.

He lost no time in rafting down to Sheep Valley, on a light one-man raft that he built the following morning. He cached the raft in the brush, ready for a hasty trip downstream if a quick getaway became necessary. It was his idea to hole up in one of the valleys that broke through the canyon walls if the hunt closed in on him.

A week later Cal and three men arrived with powder and steel.

"Webb gave me the money," Cal said, "but he can't get over the fact that instead of riding along on your profit you're throwing the whole works into the fight." Cal grinned. "Webb said that you are not an orthodox younger generation Davis. I guess he's tired of your cousins' whining."

"Any more news?"

"Plenty, and I'm saving the best until the last," Cal replied. "Tremper has his own picked men on the Box B Ranch now. They look like cowpunchers, but they aren't. They're gunfighters. Tremper's fighting mad because you got away. He figgers you're his stumbling block, and he isn't alone in that idea. Read this."

HE HANDED Ron the weekly newspaper. It looked familiar in makeup, but its name gave him a jolt. He read:

THE MOUNTAIN RANCHER
(FORMERLY THE CATTLEMEN'S JOURNAL)
MIKE TWEED, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER.

"That's the name I suggested," Ron said, "because the word, 'rancher,' covers both sheep and cattle outfits. This knocks me right off the Christmas tree."

Ron read the editorial. It said:

Beginning with this issue this newspaper changes its name to cover more territory and to take a broader view of affairs. Many of its readers can do the same, with profit. This newspaper has never liked people who fawned before, or agreed with its editor because they were afraid of the editorial lash. This editor can be wrong, and is wrong, as often as most people. To be wrong in judgment is an American right.

This editor called at the jail the other day to get a story from what he supposed was a cringing sheepman. Instead he met a forthright American who didn't hesitate to express his honest opinion—and the consequences go hang.

It was refreshing. It was a taste of the old-time ranchman and the editor relished it. Not since the day that Ed Davis came into this country, young and full of fight, has there been one like him. And the man of whom I am speaking is Ed Davis' nephew, Ron Davis. He's a throwback to the breed of man who made the West.

This editor was reminded of a few things that he had forgotten—reminded of them by a young man who faced the noose. Actually this editor had an idea that young Davis would try to win him over onto his side. This editor tried to sting him into disclosing his real self, then he realized that Ron Davis had but one self—his real self.

Later Davis was subjected to the ordeal of a grief-stricken mother making an appeal for information regarding her daughter. He passed through this ordeal with dignity and consideration. Perhaps he guessed, as this editor did, that it was a play staged by selfish persons seeking power in our country. Perhaps not.

As this is written this editor learns that masked men removed Ron Davis from jail. We hope those men were his friends, but we don't know. As an individual this editor believes Ron Davis not guilty of Betty Ballard's kidnaping or death. Some of these days we hope to shake the hand of Ron Davis—Westerner in the broadest sense of the word.

"What do you think of that?" Cal asked. "If I had wings I'd have flown over Sheep Valley and dropped that paper to you the day it was published."

"It's the second most heartening thing I've experienced since I came back home," Ron said.

"What was the first?"

"The first was the faith and cooperation that I got from the sheepmen," Ron answered. . . .

From sunrise until noon each day Ron cut hay, then he followed the drillers up the trail to check on the progress they were making. The men were experienced hardrock miners who knew little about sheep or cattle, but could get a maximum of results from a minimum of powder. They took turns at swinging the hammer. Evenings they heated their steel with a small hand forge and sharpened it.

Cal Lawrence often went along to decide whether sheep could get past, or up, areas that looked as if they needed extensive drilling.

"Sure, they can make it," he would say, and the drillers would shake their heads in amazement.

Afternoons Ron cut hay again. Probably he would go broke carrying out his plans, but from now on he hoped to turn Sheep Valley into a Diablo River Ranch resource and not a liability. Ron's common sense told him that with nothing to gain personally, it didn't make sense. He credited it to his pioneering instincts and let it go at that.

Cutting hay gave him a lot of time to think, and he thought of Betty Ballard and grew depressed.

"She had the old pioneering instinct," he often reflected, "or she'd never have gambled on the river. She'd have played safe."

Again, his thoughts would turn to the guardian angel. He hadn't the remotest idea who it could be, but he was like a good horse—on hand when needed.

Early one morning an excited man arrived on a raft that was breaking up. He was drenched, and bruised where logs had rubbed against his flesh while he had struggled to keep the raft together.

Ron helped him to dry ground.

"Don't waste no time on me," the man said. "Get Cal. A mob is fixin' to smash Mike Tweed's printin' plant. That stuff he put in about you has got everybody excited."

RON got Cal and the two of them floated the raft that had been held on hand for an emergency.

"I'm going with you, Cal," Ron said. "Tweed stuck up for me and got himself into this. It's my turn to help him out."

"And get thrown into the jug," Cal retorted. "You'll be a handicap in this deal. Sure, you want to get in there and slug, but you can't afford that, and you know it. We need you to lead the final showdown."

"I'll duck the sheriff until we've protected Tweed's plant," Ron argued.

Cal looked at him and realized that Ron's mind was made up. Cal shrugged.

"I guess I can't win every argument with you," he said, "even when horse sense is on my side." He turned toward the raft, suddenly whirled, and smashed his fist against Ron's unprotected jaw. "But here's one argument," he added as Ron dropped, "that I've got to win, fair means or foul." He studied the fallen man to assure himself that he hadn't done too good a job, then motioned to the sheepman who had brought the message. "Come on. You're going downstream with me."

The man got onto the raft and Cal pushed it out a few feet from shore. When Ron sat up and began shaking the fog out of his brain, Cal shoved the raft into the current.

Ron watched the raft disappear. He was fighting mad, promising dire revenge, but presently his common sense got the upper hand.

"For a sheepman, Cal has a lot of sound ideas," he muttered. "He's right. I'd be a handicap. But I want to throw fists and lead, don't I?"

The remainder of the day he had a bad headache, and that night turned in early. At dawn the drillers awakened him. "Thunder storm blowin' up," one of them said, "and we'd better do some blastin' while we've got the chance."

Before long came the familiar old warning of the hardrock man who is about to touch off a blast.

"Fire! Fire!" Ron, behind a ledge of rock, awaited the result. Overhead the mountains were echoing and reechoing with the rumble of thunder. Lightning stabbed earthward and struck rocks and trees. Here and there a dead, dry tree blazed briefly, then the deluge put it out. High up, rimrock tumbled into the canyons below.

Man-made thunder shook the earth nearer at hand. Rocks, loosened by the first charges, were thrown clear by the second charges. Often the debris filled in some hole.

"I never was one to bust my back shiftin' rock if powder'll do it," one of the hardrock men observed. "It's all in cuttin' the fuses. The shorter the fuse the quicker the blast. I kicks out that shoulder of rock with the first charge. The second charge blasts the loose rock away, then when the main charge lets go there's nothin' to stop several tons of rock from fillin' up that hole. If sheep are as sure-footed as you claim, they'll go over the hole without no trouble as soon as the rocks settle."

Ron served as a helper throughout the day—making paper cylinders, filling them with dirt to be tamped down on the charges; carrying powder and fuse up cliffs; and often holding roped men to a cliff face while they did their loading.

"It's costin' like sin," one of them remarked, "and we're goin' to run out of powder before the job's done."

"We'll raise the money," Ron promised.

It was dark and raining when they returned to the cabin, lighting their way with "bugs"—short pieces of candle stuck inside of tin cans, the interior of the cans serving as a reflector.

"It looks like we've had callers," one of the miners said as they reached the

door. "Here's a note pinned to the door."

It was addressed to Ron—in printed letters. Candle wax had done a fair job of sealing the folded pages so that they couldn't be opened without breaking the seals. Ron crouched down by one of the "bugs" and read:

If you'll look in Arrowhead Valley you won't worry about that killer charge. But go well armed.

The hardrock men were watching him curiously.

"This valley ain't so big," one of them said. "I don't see why a man would leave a message. Why didn't he look you up and tell you what was on his mind?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Ron said. "He must've been in a hurry." Ron realized that they would want to know the contents, because men didn't shoot the Diablo Canyon for trivial reasons. "As you know, I'm wanted in connection with Betty Ballard's disappearance. This note was a warning for me to stay under cover a while longer. They were afraid that I might want to help Tweed defend his plant, I guess."

THEY seemed satisfied, though twice during the evening they gave him curious stares.

"I may go downstream anyway," Ron said. "Tweed turned out to be a good friend."

He lay awake until twelve o'clock considering the note. He was convinced that, if it were genuine, it had come from the guardian angel. Though possibly a lawman might be trying to lure him downstream into the waiting trap of a posse.

That could be logical, in case the lawman did not want to take any risk in capturing Ron amid familiar surroundings, nor have the worry of shooting the canyon with a prisoner.

His second theory was that Trig Tremper, desperate, was trying to lure him into the open. A blast of rifle slugs from a canyon rim might be more successful than Franzen's attack.

"The guardian angel can't be everywhere at once," he thought. "Still I'm inclined to think this is on the level and that Betty may be alive and in Arrowhead Valley. Of course, anyone can print letters, so this could be from the law, from Tremper, or the guardian angel. Well, Ron, old son, you don't win fights playing it safe. We'll look into this. And we'll go well armed as the note advises." It was hard to imagine either Tremper or the law advising him to go well armed—unless to convince him the note came from a friend.

From the first Ron had carried a map of Diablo River with its blank areas indicating the unsurveyed portions. Arrowhead Valley was one of the downstream canyons, similar to Sheep Valley. If you looked sharp as you passed the split in the canyon wall, and if you had an imagination you caught a glimpse of discolored rock shaped like a crude arrowhead.

Betty, running the canyon, might have landed near Arrowhead Creek, then made her way upstream into the valley.

"If so," Ron reflected, "she's been living on trout and grass. That's different from finishing school grub. And the trout would be eaten raw. Wait, hold on. Going well-armed suggests that she's being guarded. That would mean grub."

Eventually he concluded that each theory ran into something that didn't make sense.

"I'll look into this," he concluded.

The following day he told the hardrock men that he was going downstream. They shrugged, indicating they regarded him as something of a fool.

He left that afternoon on a makeshift raft and jammed it against the bank several miles above Arrowhead Creek. Presumably a watch would be maintained daytimes at the creek mouth. Shortly after dark he went on. It was an eerie business trying to stay in the white water where he could see the rocks. The current kept throwing him into the black stretches where rocks loomed up vaguely, and with little warning.

He felt the sweep of Arrowhead Creek before he saw it, and landed a

quarter-mile below. Stumbling and wading, he reached the creek and took stock. The valley was silent, except for the creek which was noisy. He waded slowly upstream, steadying himself on heavy boulders, climbing two- and three-foot waterfalls, crawling under water-level brush.

He came to a sluggish stretch where the water was deeper, and quiet. He listened.

"Full to the brim with hush," he thought of the valley.

Then he sniffed. The smoke of an almost dead campfire came to his nostrils. It was ahead somewhere! Ron continued his slow progress upstream.

XI

FIRST Ron saw the glow of a cigarette as someone took a deep puff. Then he saw a few live coals, and the faint outline of charred sticks. Beyond was a dirty gray tent. He guessed the camp would be invisible to anyone who might be looking down from the cliffs. Trees appeared to surround it.

Ron was too wet and cold to have any chance in a rough-and-tumble fight where strength and swiftness of movement decided the outcome. Slowly he worked his way over to the opposite bank and crawled into a thicket.

Everything was drenched. Water dribbled out of his six-guns; his tobacco was sodden; and his boots were heavy with water. He stripped off and wrung the water from his clothing, then put it back on. He dried out his guns with dead moss taken from boulders. He opened a tin of corned beef and ate it, then watched the canyon rim for signs of another day.

They were long in coming, and when they did, he worked his way among rocks above the thicket, where he could watch what was going on, and at the same time not be seen unless someone went hunting for him. At last he saw a man, evidently on guard, though his gun was holstered. He was bearded, dressed in worn clothing, but looked well-fed.

His movements were indolent and lazy. When he stirred himself to rebuild the fire, he didn't seem to care whether the wood burned or not. The wood decided to burn, which moved him to put over the coffee pot. The aroma of coffee reached Ron's nostrils along with the smell of burning wood.

The man yawned, gulped down two cups of coffee and yawned again. He put bacon into a pan, fried it, then poured flapjack dough into the pan and made himself several plate-sized cakes. This done, he sauntered over to a bed made of four logs pegged so that they wouldn't roll. The space within was filled with dry grass. He shook a roll of blankets roughly and a man of the same stamp as himself crawled out.

"You keep an eye on things now," the first man ordered, yawning, "I'm sleepy."

"You're always sleepy," the second said. "Is the girl still in the tent?"

"Yeah."

"How do you know? Did you look?"

"She couldn't get away if she wanted to," the first said. He walked over and peered into the tent. "Yeah, she's there." He rolled up in the blankets and the second man made himself some breakfast.

An hour later Betty came from the tent. "Good morning, Lambie," she said to the guard.

Under her fine sarcasm the man turned red. "How many times have I told you I don't like that name," he snarled.

"A sheepman shouldn't object," she said sweetly.

Ron sensed that she was trying to infuriate the men to the point that they would think more of their anger than of guard duty, and give her a chance to make a break for it.

Betty made something of a ceremony of getting breakfast. First she piled wood onto the fire, then, gathering up all the dishes, she came down to the creek. She washed her face and hands thoroughly, combed her hair and washed her hands again. She gathered up bunches of dead grass, poured sand into the dishes and scrubbed them thoroughly. This done, she gathered up

everything and returned to the fire.

The wood had burned down to a nice bed of coals. She made her own breakfast and ate it slowly. The guard watched her without particular interest. All this was an old routine to him.

"I'm going for a walk," she told him. She struck off and he got up and followed her.

When their footsteps had died out, Ron stirred himself. He crossed the creek on a log and pounced on the sleeping man. The fellow was slugged into unconsciousness, tied and gagged before he really awakened.

Ron followed Betty's trail a half mile to a thicket, and waited. No conversation was exchanged between the girl and her guard, and Ron's first warning of her nearness was her footsteps. She passed, then the guard was opposite. Something must have warned the man, though, for he turned just as Ron was leaping. They went down in a heap. "Betty, give me a hand here!" Ron called.

She gave one look and seemed to realize only that she might be free. She must have thought it worth a try, anyhow, because she ran down the trail, smashing through thickets with little regard for her safety.

RON had his hands full with "Lambie." The man was no lamb—he was a brown bear. He used knees and elbows when fists were not handy. And the moment he recovered from his surprise, he went in for a little attempted eye gouging.

He gave Ron the hardest fight of his life, and when the man was finally knocked out Ron was reeling and gasping. He did a makeshift job of trussing the fellow up, then tossed his guns into the brush and tried to overtake Betty.

"I had a fond belief," he muttered, "that that girl has a lot of brains, but she couldn't seem to get it that I'm here to give her a hand."

He ran to the camp, but she hadn't even stopped. There was a muddy spot and her footprints plainly indicated that she had been running. Breathing hard from running and the fight, Ron lumbered along the creek toward the canyon. There was no real trail—only spots where the brush had been smashed down in passing.

When he reached the canyon, Betty had a good lead and was half-swimming, half-wading toward the raft. He saved his breath, knowing he couldn't possibly overtake her, and tried to make himself heard above the roar of the water.

She had evidently heard somewhere that you could lose a race by looking over your shoulder, because her eyes never left the raft. She untied the mooring line and climbed aboard, then looked back. There was neither derision, nor amusement in her expression.

Ron shook his head. "You don't suppose she thought I was in cahoots with that pair?" he wondered. "Holy K. Smoke, couldn't she see that that was a real fight? But she never looked back."

Ron, gun in hand, returned to camp. Lambie had released his companion and they were rubbing bruised muscles. Both were unarmed now.

"So she give you the slip?" Lambie said. "If ever there was a hell-cat, it's her. Day and night she asked questions, tried to get away, tried to wear us down. We'll catch it for lettin' her get away, but we're well rid of her."

"Suppose we sit down and talk?" Ron suggested. And at once began to explain his own position and why he was there.

"I've been hiding out," he said, "because of a killing or kidnaping charge. If they couldn't stick me one way, they would the other. The lady in the case just got away. I'm in the clear, but you two will have to explain things to the sheriff—if you're caught. Is that right?"

Lambie nodded. Ron could see that the pair felt that they were trapped. Neither could detect an avenue of escape, but they were searching for it, in spite of the gun Ron held on them steadily.

"How'd you get hold of her in the first place?" Ron asked.

"Tremper knowed you two was in the valley together," Lambie explained. "He figgered you're smooth and would talk

her into comin' in on your side. He had other plans. He figgered you'd come downstream together, so he planted men in a canvas boat a mile above Little River. Us two and some others. We lined the boat upstream and it was tough goin' agin the current. Instead of both of you comin' down, the girl comes by herself."

"What shape was she in?"

"Near drowned," Lambie said. "It seems like she'd paddled canoes and what-not back East on rivers when she was in school. She figgered a raft would be a cinch. She wanted no part of any sheepman, and that's why she left you behind. We didn't have no trouble grabbin' her. She was so tuckered out there was no fight left in her."

"Was Tremper directing the job?" Ron asked.

"You ain't so smart, are you?" Lambie sneered. "Tremper don't show hisself. He's got to keep under cover and give orders. He'd already figgered a way into Arrowhead Valley. He didn't know whether he could handle the hellcat or not, so he decided to put her in Arrerhead Valley with us to guard her. We rolled grub down steep places, wrapped in tents and blankets so it wouldn't get smashed up. We had everything all set, so when we got the girl all we had to do was to bring her here."

"Which makes you kidnapers," Ron said. "Still, I don't want to be bothered with you."

The boldness in Lambie's eyes, the craft in his companion's, puzzled Ron. They were a dirty, treacherous pair, but smarter than they looked. His watchfulness increased.

"Suppose," he said, "we get out of the valley together, then go our separate ways. I'm forgetting all about you providing you show me the way out. Whatever is done about your kidnaping Betty Ballard is up to the sheriff."

"And if we don't show you the way out?" Lambie suggested.

"I'll shoot you up," Ron answered cheerfully. "Oh, I won't kill you. Just disable you so you can't get the jump on me. Then I'll build a raft and we'll shoot what's left of Diablo Canyon."

"Hanged if I don't believe he'd do it," Lambie said to the other man. He turned back to Ron. "Let's get out of here, Davis."

"Walk ahead until the climbing starts," Ron said. "I'll pick up enough grub for a couple of meals, first. You two sprawl out on the ground, face down until I'm ready to start."

THEY obeyed and Ron selected several cans of food and divided them three ways, then he set the tent on fire.

"Hey," Lambie protested, "what you doin' that for?"

"You may have an idea of putting something over on me and coming back to camp and hiding out," Ron answered. "Lack of grub and blankets will discourage that. Pick up your grub and we'll go."

When they began climbing, Ron sent Lambie well ahead, and directed that the other man remain two hundred feet behind. If Lambie started rolling rocks down it was just as well to have his companion in a dangerous spot. The latter realized this for his eyes, as he looked at Lambie, plainly said, "No, don't try it."

In several places it was necessary to rope outcroppings and climb up the rope hand over hand. Each time when it became Ron's turn, he sent Lambie on ahead where he could do no damage.

An hour of daylight remained when they reached the rimrock.

"Now," Ron said with a touch of grimness, "we're all tired. We'll sleep like tops tonight, which might put me at a disadvantage. Pick the spot where you want to spend the night. It should be sheltered, because you'll be without blankets and wood isn't plentiful."

Puzzled, they picked a spot near a lightning-killed snag. Fuel could be obtained by breaking off limbs. Neither Lambie nor his companion had a knife.

"Take off your boots," Ron ordered. "I'll take them with me, leaving them on rocks where you can see them tomorrow morning when it's daylight."

"Suppose you take 'em off?" Lambie defiantly suggested.

"I'm sorry," Ron said softly, "but

that wouldn't be sound strategy. I think I can slow you down by shooting off your boot heels. And you'd better hold still or I might take a hunk of foot instead of leather."

"You win," Lambie said, as if suddently tired of the whole business.

The two almost threw their boots at him. They watched him as he headed in the general direction of barbed wire. He put one right boot on a large rock, then went on to another rock a half-mile distant, where he hung up the second on a snag. He looked back to see if they were following him. They were content to watch, rather than follow. They wanted only to save time on the boot hunt in the morning.

It was dark when Ron left the third boot. He lined up a star to guide him, and made his way through the night until a rock loomed up. Here he left the fourth boot.

He changed his direction slightly, continued on until the country became too dangerous for him to travel in starlight, then settled down out of reach of the wind.

In the gray of false dawn Ron struck off, hoping to avoid the Box B spread with its hostile gunmen, and equally hostile owner. The sun was an hour above the horizon when he caught a rather meek horse and rode it to wire bordering a road.

He slowed up his pace as soon as he was on the road, hoping that someone would come along. A sheepman, carrying a rifle across his knees, and driving a buckboard rounded a bend. Ron hailed him. "I was goin' home," the sheepman said, "but seein' it's you, Davis, I'm turnin' 'round and headin' for Red Coulee. But ain't you takin' a chance?"

"Not unless something happened to Betty Ballard in the lower stretch of Diablo Canyon," Ron answered. "Leave me near Webb's office. I'll stay under cover until the train comes in. Now, tell me what's happened. Did they mob Tweed's newspaper plant?"

"Trig Tremper give Tweed one more chance to back down," the sheepman replied. "So most of the sheepmen went back home. A nice bunch of us was on hand, ready to fight off a mob if it moved in on Tweed. Cal Lawrence has sort of been the boss while you've been away. Do you know what we're afraid of?"

"What?"

"We figger if Tremper gets the idea into his head that he can't win he'll smash the whole country. Power's what he's after—rule or ruin. It seems like we ought to throw him in the jug on some charge or other."

"He works through other parties and pays them to take the punishments he'd ordinarily get," Ron answered. "I'm hopeful, though, he'll slip before he's done too much damage."

RED COULEE had eased up for midday when Ron arrived. He pulled his hat low to cover his eyes, and slid down in the seat to make it appear that he was about five-feet-six. The sheepman turned into an alley and stopped.

"I guess the back way will be safer. This town won't cool off until it sees the girl."

Webb was astounded when Ron suddenly appeared in his office. He hastily shut the door. "Great heavens, son, what're you doing here? This town's thirsting for blood."

"If Betty Ballard made it safely downstream," Ron answered, "she'll be in on the one o'clock train." He related what had happened, and Webb nodded.

"Sometimes I send out for my dinner," Webb said. "I guess you can eat a square meal for a change. I'll run over to the hotel and put in an order. What do you want?"

"I'd like a T-bone steak about an inch thick," Ron answered, "and some corn on the cob if they've got any. Plenty of butter. Corn's dry without butter."

"I don't think they've got any corn," Webb said.

"Then how about hot corn bread?" Ron suggested.

"Good idea," Webb agreed. "Corn bread should be eaten with butter melting and running down the fingers. What else?"

"Baked potatoes," Ron said. "And

suppose we end it up with apple pie, smothered in cream?"

"That kind of a meal is a little rich for a man of my age, but I'll tell them I'm kicking over the traces," Webb said. He hurried off, knowing Ron was hungry enough to gnaw the leather binding on his law books.

The one o'clock train arrived just as the hotel sent over the tray of food. Ron kept under cover until the hotel man was gone, then moved to the window and watched the passengers leaving the depot.

"Betty isn't among them," he said to Webb. "That's serious. I hoped she'd show up. I'd like to attend to some business this afternoon."

"You keep out of sight in the next room," Webb ordered. "I'll leave the door open and we can talk. If you hear anybody coming up the stairs keep quiet. Don't let your voice get too loud. By golly, I hope nothing has happened to that girl."

"What's Hank doing with the mine Uncle Ed willed him?" asked Ron.

"Not a thing. Nor is Jed running the brick-yard. I've talked to them with tears in my eyes, but they're resentful. Now I'll have those two properties in the estate again."

Webb talked of Tweed's determined stand against Tremper and what he called "the foreign rowdies" the man had imported.

"I wish we had a stronger sheriff," Webb concluded. "Nat Burns was elected when things were quiet and no one wanted the job. Now we need a strong man, and we haven't got him." It was obvious he was greatly disturbed over the situation.

"What about the Bar D?" Ron asked.

"Under Porky's management it's making money," Webb answered. "It always has."

"You can't tell me the name of the institution that is going to get the property?" Ron asked. "Along with the bum gold mine and the brick-yard?"

"That'll come out in due time," Webb replied. "Probably after peace and order have come to our range." He left Ron with some newspapers, and turned to one of his cases. The afternoon dragged and when six o'clock came the lawyer suggested that he had better send out for another tray.

"The evening train won't get in until eight o'clock," he said, "and you can't show yourself."

XII

WEBB went downstairs, and a few minutes later Ron heard him coming back, two steps at a time, which was too fast for a man of his years.

"Didn't you tell me that this man you, or rather Betty, called Lambie had skipped the country with his partner?"

"I supposed the two would jump at the chance," Ron answered.

"Two men answering their description just came into town," Webb said. "They're talking with Trig Tremper in front of the Water-hole. It's dark, so slip down and take a look, but don't get caught. I don't like this. It smacks too much of a typical Tremper deal."

Ron slipped down the back stairs, and through the alley until he could see the main street. Lambie and his partner were talking to Tremper, sure enough. But it soon became evident that Tremper was giving orders that they were reluctant to obey. The trio disappeared and Ron slipped through the shadows until he could look down the main street. The men had stopped and Tremper was indicating the sheriff's office. Lambie and his partner went in, and Tremper walked briskly back to the Water-hole.

"He had to show his fangs that time," Ron reflected, "and he probably feels the need of a stiff slug of firewater."

When Ron got back to Webb's office, the lawyer had ordered Ron's supper, and explained that he would be working overtime tonight. Ron made short work of the meal, then fretted until the train whistled.

"I'm going down to the station," he told Webb, "I can't stand the suspense any longer. I'll sneak between the cattle cars, and if Betty doesn't show up I'll light out for the Diablo River Ranch."

"I'll be down there," Webb promised.

"Criminal law is out of my field, but I'm certainly in the mood to look after your affairs."

Much against his inclinations, Ron skulked down to the station. He watched the train come in, and breathed a sigh of relief when Betty, wearing clothes she had bought in Little River, stepped off the train. He hurried to the platform.

"Good evening, Betty," he said. "You've certainly taken a load off of my mind. I'm glad you made it though."

"You have more nerve than a Government mule," she answered shortly. "I don't think you'll get away with your bluff."

Someone tapped Ron on the shoulder. "Hello, Ron Davis," the sheriff said. "I guess you'll have to come along with me."

"Guess again," Ron said. "There's the girl I was accused of killing."

"In this state kidnaping is serious," the sheriff said. "Your men kidnaped Betty Ballard and kept her in Arrowhead Valley. To save their own hides they came in a while ago, turned state's evidence, and made a clean breast of it." As Ron violently protested, the sheriff motioned to Betty. "You just got off the train and I haven't had a chance to talk to you, but weren't you kidnaped by two of Ron Davis' men?"

"Yes," she answered.

"I came into the valley when I learned where you were!" Ron exploded. "You saw me fighting the one you called Lambie and you didn't even wait to see how the fight came out."

"It was a fake fight, because Davis wanted to make you think he was a tin hero," Sheriff Burns said. "The men told me so."

"They were his men, Sheriff," Betty said quietly, "I heard them talking several times. They were being paid to keep me out of the way. The sheepmen believed, that with only my mother on the ranch, they could cross the Box B with their flocks. Now if you'll excuse me, Sheriff, I'll hurry home. My poor mother is frantic, I know."

"I'll tell Trig Tremper you're in town, Betty," the sheriff said. "He'll have you out home in a hurry. He's been runnin' the Box B for your ma, and he drove in yesterday with your fastest span of horses."

Webb stepped up. "I believe you, Ron," he said, "and I think Betty has been deceived. The best thing for you to do is go to jail. I think I can get you out on bail in the morning." He shook his head dubiously. "I'm beginning to realize that most of Tremper's schemes are airtight. I wonder how long it'll be before the range realizes it."

"I'll be satisfied when Betty realizes it," Ron said wearily. He was so tired that even a jail bunk seemed like a pleasant place to spend the night. . . .

THE news of Ron's arrest spread rapidly, and within twenty-four hours sheepmen were on their way to Red Coulee. Sheepmen could vote and the sheriff, though inwardly hostile, permitted them to talk to Ron through the bars. To a man they were scraping the bottom of the poke to get bail money.

Because there was so much impending disorder and because feeling ran high, bail was set at ten thousand dollars cash.

"You keep your money for the days to come," Ron said. "Webb is going to raise it on my Diablo River ranch. I don't know how he's working it, but it's coming from the bank."

They didn't believe it, because the bank was owned by cattlemen, but forty-eight hours after Ron's arrest he was sitting in a room in the hotel talking with Cal Lawrence.

"The town is crawling with Tremper men," Cal said. "He's stirring up the cattlemen. Mostly in the past they've waited for us to try to drive flocks over their range, but now they're out looking for trouble. Beefy, Big Pete and Little Pete have been ginning up, but yesterday, I'm told, they began cutting down and are sober."

"Sobering up means they're getting ready for trouble," Ron said.

Tweed's paper came out Friday night, and Ron was confident things would be quiet until then. He kept an eye on the plant Friday and noticed that in the

early afternoon strangers were dropping in and asking, "Is the paper out yet?"

"Tremper men," Ron concluded.

At eight o'clock Friday evening Tweed put up a sign stating the paper would be out Saturday morning at nine o'clock. Tweed could be seen as late as midnight setting type. Either his original piece wasn't strong enough, or else it was too strong.

"It probably wasn't strong enough," Ron told Cal, "and my guess is that he's putting teeth into it."

People who liked to sleep late after a night's heavy drinking were on hand at nine o'clock Saturday morning. Tweed picked up a bundle of newspapers, came out, locked the door behind him and started down the street.

"Gimme a paper, Tweed," a Tremper man said, thrusting two bits at the editor.

"I deliver to my regular subscribers first," Tweed said, "then if there are any left over, I sell them—or give them away. I don't see any reason for changing my system."

He went down the street, shoving papers under doors, and it wasn't until he reached the Water-hole that a paper was available to the mob that was following him.

"Here's your paper, Foghorn," he said.

Foghorn Carrigan glanced at the paper, restrained his impulse to whistle, then hung the paper in the window. The crowd poured through the batwing doors and hurried to the window. People overflowed the sidewalk, and some of the street.

"One of you up in front read it out good and loud," a cowpuncher shouted. "We can't all see it."

"Yeah, and some of us can't read," a range wit added.

A third man poked his head through the batwing doors.

"Foghorn, come here!" he called. "We need a big voice."

Foghorn obliged, and the editorial he read said:

How much longer are we going to put up with an outsider stirring up trouble? I'm not talking to sheepmen, nor cattlemen. I'm talking to Diablo County ranchers and Red Coulee's citizens. Trig Tremper doesn't pay a dime's worth of taxes in this county. He doesn't own a sliver of timber, a blade of grass, nor a clod of sod. He doesn't spin. And if firing the old hands on the Box B and replacing them with gun-packing rowdies can be called toiling, then most of you can think of harder jobs.

Only the fact that Ron Davis' friends *borrowed* him from the sheriff at a time when he was charged with a killing saved him from being lynched by a Tremper-inspired mob. This same Ron Davis recently freed Miss Betty Ballard from kidnapers. True, by producing the "deceased," he cleared himself of murder, nevertheless there was personal risk involved. His reward? The young lady charges him with the kidnaping. Has she been influenced by Tremper's advice, or has this outsider so entrenched himself on the Box B that the widow and daughter of the late Major Ballard are helpless? If this is true, then the friends of the late major should hide their heads in shame.

Using the editorial *we*, we hereby appoint ourselves chairman of a committee to invite Tremper and his men to leave Diablo County, and if the invitation is not accepted in the spirit with which it is tendered, then we feel this committee should run them out of town. The committee roster is wide open to self-appointed members. First come, first served.

WHILE Foghorn Carrigan was reading the paper in front of his saloon window, Ron and Cal were reading Webb's copy.

"It took some time for Tweed to awaken to what was going on," Webb said, "but once aroused there are no half-way measures about him. He should be supported. I shall line up squarely with him. We can't do much until next week. It'll take that long to bring the decent element together, in force."

"Next week may be too late," Ron suggested. "I think things will happen tonight. Mr. Webb, why don't you go over to the sheriff's office and warn him that the decent citizens will stand for no mob nonsense? Of course he'll claim that Tweed is pouring oil on fire."

"I'll do that," Webb promised.

The lawyer was shaking his head when he returned. "Tweed's paper was open on his desk," he reported, "and a deputy told me that the sheriff had just received an important call. He didn't know when he would be back."

"An Indian beating his squaw, probably," Ron commented. "That sort of

thing must be stopped, you know. I guess we'll have to do something."

"That sounds like war, Ron," Webb said. "I suppose that is the way it must be. Take care of yourself. . . ."

Ron detailed the less well-known sheepmen to hang around the saloons and pool halls and pick up what information they could. Two of these men returned in mid-afternoon and reported that a mob was planning to smash Tweed's printing plant that night. "Now go back," Ron suggested, "and drop a word in the right place that anyone moving in on Tweed tonight had better wear a mask. A grain sack with holes cut for the eyes works out well."

"Now what are you up to?" Cal Lawrence asked.

"I'm trying to force Tremper into the open," Ron said. "There's plenty of talk about his leadership and all that, but he does mighty little that could be proved in court."

By ten o'clock there was little doubt that there would be trouble. At ten-fifteen Ron gave final directions to his own men, then with a grain sack rolled up under his arm, he made his way to the vicinity of Tweed's office which was located in a one-story brick building.

Shortly after eleven o'clock the mob milling around in front of the Waterhole turned toward Tweed's. The editor heard the menacing growl. He blew out all lights, shoved a desk in front of his open door and waited. He could see no percentage in locking a door that was half glass. He leaned three shotguns against the desk and two six-guns rested snugly in their holsters.

"If I shoot I'll kill younger people—fools, or tools who have no business being in a mob." he thought. "Perhaps I should let them wreck my plant, and start over again. Still property should be protected, if not by the authorities, then by the owner. So I'll defend my property."

He felt terribly alone. It was easier to face trouble, or a mob, with someone at your side. He had an idea Ron Davis might show up. Then he told himself that Ron was needed for bigger things.

"No, I didn't size him up wrong," he thought. "I'm only a sideshow, and he's in the main tent."

Then he heard them coming, and a moment later saw their vague movements against the lights from adjoining windows. Someone carried a sack on the end of a long stick. It had been saturated in coal oil and set on fire. It was a torch that shed drops of burning oil every few feet. By its light Tweed saw hooded men.

"They're afraid to show their faces," he thought bitterly.

He raised his voice at last. "Stop where you are! There are many of you and only one of me, but as long as I last, I'll fight for what I own. I'm waiting with a ten-gage gun loaded with buckshot!"

When they stopped, they heard the click as he pulled back the hammers.

"I'm going to die tonight," he said grimly. "And so are some of you. It may be you! Or you! Or you!" He turned his head as he spoke, as if addressing certain members of the mob.

It was pathetic, this man who felt that he had plenty of unfinished business remaining, trying to bluff a mob. The men were ready to rush him now. He could sense that some were working in from each side in order to escape the blast of his gun. The man with the torch looked as if he might throw it through the window to start a fire.

NOW the mob had stopped again.

"What're we waitin' for?" a voice cried.

"We're waitin' for our leader to lead the way!" another voice answered. "Come on, Trig. You're the man he's insulted. Come on, Trig! Make way for Trig Tremper."

Throughout the mob voices began demanding, "Where's Tremper?"

"He's at the hotel," someone said. "We can handle this without him. Let him stay there."

"Stay there!" a voice howled. "He wants to be in on this. Come on!"

The man began pushing his way toward the hotel, several blocks away. Others followed, chanting, "We want Tremper! We want Tremper!"

There's a strong similarity between a mob and a flock of sheep—either will follow the leader. Back in the printing plant Tweed relaxed slightly.

"A reprieve," he muttered wearily. "But that's all it is. They'll be back."

Faintly now he could hear, "Come on out, Trig! Come on, and tell us what you want done to Tweed! Hey, Tremper! We're waitin'!"

Tweed jumped suddenly to his feet as he noticed shadows moving just out of shotgun range. Then he heard Ron Davis' voice.

"Tweed? It's Davis and Cal Lawrence."

They climbed over the desk blocking the door and came in. "Both of you, eh?" the editor said. "One of you'd better get out. The sheepmen can't afford to lose both of you."

"I don't think they're coming back," Ron said. "They built themselves up, turned away, and now have let down. A few may come back, but it won't be the mob. They're heading for the saloons now, but Foghorn Carrigan sent word to all places that they had better close down for the night—that it would look bad if a riot started. Foghorn refused a couple of hundred drinks tonight."

"What made 'em turn back?" Tweed asked.

Cal Lawrence laughed. "Ron sent our men around saying that it would be a good idea if everybody wore masks so that they wouldn't be identified. Most of 'em jumped at the chance. That gave us a chance to put on masks, too, and mix with the Tremper outfit, and the others that had gathered. We were well organized, and at the right time began yelling for Tremper to come and lead us."

"And you had an idea that Tremper wouldn't come?" Tweed chuckled over this bit of strategy.

"I gambled on it," Ron said. "While the boys were in front of the hotel yelling for their leader I slipped around in back and saw him come down the back stairs. He'll claim he'd already left for the Box B when things began to happen. The man's pretty good at saving his face."

"All of which gives me material for an editorial next week," Tweed said. "I've a cot in back. One of you can rest while I stay on watch."

"You take a rest and let us watch," Ron said. "You need to ease up more than we do."

XIII

TRIG TREMPER had fully expected to watch a well-planned riot from his hotel window. He had made a quick trip to the Box B to check on things there and had returned to give orders to his men, then take to the cover of his room.

He had pulled up a chair in his darkened room, opened the window, and waited for the sounds that would indicate that printing presses were being smashed and cases of type dumped into the street. Then he had heard the voices demanding his leadership, and had begun cursing. He knew how mobs reacted to demands from within their ranks, and he wondered why Atwood, Big and Little Pete and the others didn't shout down such demands.

Then he had heard the mob coming to the hotel and that was when he made a quick retreat.

Tremper had quickly saddled a horse in his private stall a block from the hotel, and while the mob was still demanding his leadership he was riding quietly along the outskirts of town. Once in the open, he spurred his horse into a pace that was little short of killing. He wanted it to look as if he had been well on the way to the Box B when the trouble started.

His entrance into the ranchhouse when he reached it was quiet. He got to his room without being heard and slipped into bed.

In the morning he heard Mrs. Ballard moving about, hastily shaved, and was his smooth, assured self when he came down to breakfast. Mrs. Ballard greeted him with a pleased, "Good morning, John." Few people used his given name, but Mrs. Ballard thought nicknames were crude.

Betty came down a little later. "Quite recovered from your kidnaping experi-

ence?" he asked. "You look lovely this morning."

"I'll live," the girl answered. "Of course I was frightened when I was first hustled into the valley, but I soon learned that Lambie and Honey Pie were rather stupid, if watchful guards."

"Lambie and Honey Pie, eh?"

"Betty," Mrs. Ballard said. "Such nicknames!"

"Oh there was a purpose in the nicknames, Mother," Betty explained. "It made them furious, because each regarded himself as a hairy-chested brute. The names really got under their skins." She was thoughtful. "You told me, I believe, that they had turned state's evidence," she said to Tremper. "What sort of witnesses do you think they'll make? Naturally Ron Davis will hire good lawyers to defend himself."

"Not very good witnesses, I'm afraid," Tremper said. "They can be tangled up by a good cross-examiner. Of course, I don't know the men personally, but I've seen them, and have talked with others who do know them." He smiled. "Would you like to ride over the Box B? You haven't had much of a chance since your return. You hired me, you know."

"Until Buck Young can take over," she reminded him. "What do you hear from Buck?"

Tremper naturally had heard nothing from the mythical Buck, but he took this in stride.

"Buck asked for a little more time, Betty. The people he is with don't want to let him go."

"I'll be glad to ride over the place with you," she said. "What time shall we start?"

"I've some things to talk over with my foreman," Tremper said. "How about eleven o'clock? And we'll take a lunch along?"

"Eleven o'clock—and a lunch," she agreed.

Tremper's confident mood changed as soon as he was with the foreman. "I've got to come out in the open," he said.

"Davis smoked you out, eh?"

"No, Davis didn't smoke me out," Tremper snapped. "Some fools in the mob wanted me to lead them. I barely made it out of town. I hope they went back and smashed that blasted newspaper plant, but I don't know."

"They probably cooled off," the foreman said. He had spent several years with Tremper and was one of his key men. At times he expressed his frank opinion, or even argued a point.

"From reports that are coming in," Tremper continued, "the sheepmen are getting ready to try a drive to the railroad. Cal Lawrence has made inquiry about cars."

"There're enough sheep in the back country to make several trainloads," the foreman said. "What do you want done?"

"I'm going to circulate the report that I'm shipping Box B cattle because I have an inside tip there's going to be a big drop in price," Tremper said. "Every rancher in this part of the country will start shipping. What I want is plenty of cattle, bunched behind barbed wire, near the roads. If we can't stampede the sheep over some cliff we can stampede cattle through them."

AT ELEVEN o'clock Betty appeared with lunches, and a few minutes later they were riding over the range. She talked about commonplace things for a while, and then said:

"Let's ride over to Soda Springs and see what we have in the way of beef on that range."

"The range was overgrazed," Tremper said quickly, "and I shifted most of the cattle to give the grass a chance to come back. We'll ride over and look at them. They aren't in very good shape."

"And in what shape are our finances?" she wanted to know.

"I wanted to increase the bank loan to reorganize things around here," he said, "but they turned me down—after their appraiser had looked over the cattle. Frankly, it's going to be a long haul, but the Box B can be put back on its feet. You have a fine breed of cattle and if we can lease some of the Government range that sheepmen now use, it'll give this range a needed rest."

"In other words," she said, "all we

need is time, some good rains, and Buck Young's expert management."

"That's it," he agreed.

"Well, he can't get here any too soon to suit me," she said.

"Nor me," he said.

When she returned home late that night, Betty was in a depressed mood. Hundreds of head of Box B cattle had changed into tough, stringy beef.

"If a restaurant sent me in a steak from anything I saw today," she told her mother, "I'd send it right back—and order mutton, as much as I detest sheep. . . ."

Trig Tremper remained on the ranch several days, then rode to Red Coulee. More and more developments were flushing him from the cover that he usually enjoyed. Open leadership, with which he won or lost, was the only answer.

Betty formed a habit of taking evening rides toward town, invariably arriving home late. The fifth night she left word that she was going all the way to town, and wouldn't be back for several days.

"What's she doin' in town?" Beefy demanded of Tremper when he had seen her in Red Coulee for a day or so. "Ain't we got trouble enough without her seein' things? You can't tell about a fool woman. They're always up to somethin'. Tweed took a dig at her in his paper, hintin' that she should know that her kidnapers were your men and not Davis'. That should get her mad up. She might go over there and stage a one-woman riot. Again, she might be the type that loves them that beat her." He laughed loudly, as a sudden thought came. "She should be plumb fond of you when she finds out the beatin' you're givin' her." Then he grew serious. "Get her out of town, is my advice."

"She'll go in a few days," Tremper said. "I'll trump up some excuse. We've got everything in hand. Davis, Lawrence and all that crowd are back in the sheep country. Our men are circulating the report the price of beef is dropping, and the cattlemen are rounding up their best steers. I've never felt better."

Tremper's fine spirits ended abruptly several days later. Betty hailed him on the street.

"Good news for both of us!" she exclaimed. "You won't have to pack our troubles around any longer. Buck Young is coming! I just received a wire from him!"

Tremper's poker face never served him better than at this moment. He couldn't very well say, "There's no such person. This man who wired you is an imposter!" He didn't know what to say, and finally he did say, "Fine! Fine! It's strange, though, he didn't wire me."

"Oh, he didn't want to bother you, I guess," she answered. "He'll be in on tomorrow evening's train. You'll be on hand to greet him, of course. You're old friends, didn't you tell me?"

"Sure, I'll be on hand," Tremper said, with a touch of grimness. "We aren't close friends, though. Rather, my recommendation of him for the job is based on my knowledge of his ability."

He thought of another angle, too. Mrs. Ballard had given him a power of attorney that was to be revoked upon Buck Young's arrival. And he wasn't ready to release such authority just yet. Betty was regarding him curiously.

"What is he like?" she asked.

Tremper played safe. "He's a man's man," he answered.

BETTY BALLARD left Tremper and walked slowly toward Mike Tweed's newspaper office.

"I suppose you're going to declare war on me, too," the editor said the moment she entered, getting in the first word—no mean feat in itself.

"No, I merely wanted to ask you if you believed what you published about me?" she said.

"Now that I've taken a second look at you," Tweed said, "I can't understand how you can believe Ron Davis was staging a show when he came storming into Arrowhead Valley and tied into your guards. He's the kind to stand up and take his medicine and not resort to trickery when things are going against him."

"I merely wanted to know how you felt," she murmured. "Sometimes peo-

ple change their minds. Evidently you haven't." At the door she paused. "Here's a news item, by the way. A Mr. Buck Young is coming to take charge of the Box B. He comes very highly recommended."

"Recommended by whom?" Tweed asked. "I've seen yellow dogs that were highly recommended. But I'll put an item in the paper about him."

Betty went out without mentioning Buck Young's references.

Tweed was on hand the following evening when the train arrived. To the editor the Box B outfit was an enemy, and anyone connected with the spread was against him. He saw a good-looking young man whose shoulders seemed to be a yard wide, jump down from the train, look around, then walk over to Betty Ballard.

"You're Miss Ballard, aren't you?" the young man said. "I'm sure sorry I couldn't get here sooner. I'm Buck Young, and I'll try to earn my pay."

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Young," the girl said, "and I'm sure you'll earn your pay. There's so much to be done. You know Mr. Tremper, of course, he's the one who recommended you."

"Sure, I know Tremper." He walked over to Tremper and shook hands with that amazed individual. "Thanks, plenty, for recommendin' me to the new job. I'll sure try to deliver the goods." Buck Young's huge left hand carried a heavy suitcase as if it were a handbag. "I've got a saddle and warbag up in the baggage car. Can we start out tonight, Miss Ballard? I'd like to begin work, first thing in the mornin'."

"I've a buckboard waiting," Betty answered.

Tweed was about to follow them from the station, when he noticed Ron Davis getting off the train. Ron's clothing looked rumpled again, and Tweed realized he had made another trip downstream.

"How do I stand?" Ron asked the editor. "I never know whether I'm to be arrested for some new crime, or be tried for the old when I show up in town."

"The county attorney is getting his kidnaping case ready," Tweed answered. "The two buzzards that Betty Ballard calls Lambie and Honey Pie are waiting to testify when the time comes, but life's hard on 'em. Everybody knows about Betty's nicknames and it's a poor day when some puncher or miner don't sound off. Then there's a fist fight." He shook his head. "That girl's got some good things about her. Blast it all, I wish that she was different."

"So do I," Ron agreed with feeling. "Who's the big cuss that she met? I noticed him on the train. He kept to himself and said nothing."

"A fellow named Buck Young, the Box B's new boss. You know as much as I do about him. What're you here for?"

"More money, so that I can buy more powder, to blast out more rock," Ron answered. "We've hit some granite, and it's dulling steel and eating up powder."

Ron walked up the street, and found Webb in his office. "Let's get hold of the bank and see if we can't shake a little money out of it," he suggested. "I know it's after hours, but we know where to find the banker. I think I can show him that we can pay back everything within sixty days. The Sheep Valley trail looks mighty good."

The banker listened quietly when Ron called on him, but there was a bilious expression on his face.

"No," he grunted when Ron had finished with his request. "No. Too much trouble brewing on the range. I wish it would be settled one way or another, then I could do business. We can't go on this way, with everybody losing money. I like you, Davis, but you can't make a steady profit out of that sheep ranch. Too many natural handicaps. . . . I'll tell you what I'll do."

"Go ahead," Ron said. "I'm listening."

"You lease some good range somewhere, stock it with cattle, and I'll get plenty of backing for you. But no sheep, mind you, no sheep," he concluded. "Think it over, and let me know."

"I'm seeing this job through," Ron said. "Everything I've done in knocking around the country has been high school

stuff. I'm in an institution of higher learning now."

WEBB invited Ron back to his office. "I'll stake you personally," he said. "How much do you need?"

"Three thousand dollars," Ron answered, "and I'll give you a mortgage on the sheep."

"No," Webb said quickly, "that isn't security enough. My security is Ron Davis personally."

Ron left the following morning with his load of powder, and feeling fine. He knew that Webb had broken a lifelong rule by backing an individual. It was his theory that a lawyer couldn't be a miner, cattleman or businessman and at the same time give his best to his profession. For that reason he invested only in stocks and mortgages which didn't depend as much on a single individual.

As Ron loaded the powder on the raft the following day and started the run to Sheep Valley, he had a feeling that he was running the river for the last time this season, or perhaps any other. If he failed he had better move on where the meat wasn't as tough.

Men were waiting for the powder and as soon as the raft grounded they began packing the cases ashore. Hour after hour they trudged up the newly made trail to the higher levels. From the valley floor they looked like crawling insects clinging to the ragged edge of nothing.

Cal Lawrence relieved Ron of his load as he neared the "roof" that had nearly taken his life and that of Betty Ballard the first time he had tried to look down on Sheep Valley. The miners had drilled holes here and plugged them with rags to keep out the dirt. They had left the job of loading the holes to Ron as there were several spots lower down needing drilling to widen the trail. They were spots that might well make even a sheep dizzy.

They camped there that night and at daylight Ron began loading the holes. Even dirt for the tamping had to be carried up there. It was noon before the job was finished, and mid-afternoon before thunder and lightning began to play among the peaks. Water was drenching the country, and rushing over the "roof" in torrents when Ron lighted the fuses.

Cal Lawrence had already retreated to a safe spot behind a shoulder of rock two hundred yards away.

"Hurry, Ron!" he kept yelling. "Those blasts may let go any second."

"The miners cut the fuses the right length," Ron answered. "I've plenty of time. A half minute yet." He joined Cal, and presently the roof heaved upward, crumpled and spilled over the wall. Water washed off shattered bits of rock, leaving a continuation of the ledge that joined stretches of the trail lower down.

"There she is!" Cal said. "As good a job of drilling as ever I hope to see. It leads straight to the split between the rocks. Let's see what's beyond. A little rain won't hurt us." He waved Ron on ahead of him. "You should be the first to make the trip from Sheep Valley up as you were the first to come from the mountains and climb down."

Ron went ahead, following the same course he had taken when he had ridden in. Afoot, they could take short cuts, and sheep would travel on their feet.

"Let's keep going until we hit Box B wire," Cal suggested. "I'd like to get the lay of the land in case—" He broke off suddenly.

Ron grinned. "In case something happens to me?" he suggested.

"This isn't a Sunday school picnic," Cal reminded him.

XIV

SHORTLY before sundown Ron and Cal arrived at Box B wire. Cal went through to a little rise of ground.

"I know where I am now," he said. "That's Soda Springs Valley just beyond. If we could shove our sheep through the valley we could miss a lot of bad country where they might stampede the sheep. This way is longer, but we've got a better chance of making it without Ballard punchers spotting us. I've an idea they're expecting us to take the short way, if we try it at all."

"Let's walk a ways," Ron suggested. "I'd like to check the valley for spots where they could stop us. We'll have to spend the night in the open, without grub or blankets, but it'll do us good."

They saw a bunch of Box B beef.

"There are the best beefs I've seen in a long time," Cal said. "Ready for market. I wonder if the Ballards know about this stuff? The cattle nearer the ranchhouse look lean and run-down."

"We'll drive our sheep through here," Ron decided. "These beefs are so fat that they won't make any trouble. I'll bet you'd have a time forcing some of those critters out of a slow crawl."

"I've been hearing that the Ballards are hard up," Cal said. "How can anybody be hard up with money in the poke like this?" He nodded toward the steers. "Well, it's no worry of ours, Ron. We're neck-deep in grief as it is. Let's pick a place to hole up before it gets too dark. . . ."

The Ballard steers looked as good in daylight as they looked in dusk when Ron and Cal passed them to pick landmarks to follow for the sheep drive. They outlined two avenues of retreat should trouble develop. Then, keeping under cover much of the time, they made their way back toward Sheep Valley. A piece of paper held in place by a rock caught Ron's eyes as he started through the split in the rocks. It was the now familiar print, unsigned, as usual, and it read:

Get your sheep through in forty-eight hours or it will be too late.

"From the guardian angel?" Cal suggested. "He's been off the job lately, or else felt that you were taking care of yourself. This, now, is a warning that we shouldn't pass up."

"I'd sure like to know who the guardian angel is," Ron said. "He's handier than an extra gun in a gunfight."

"Maybe the guardian angel knows what Betty Ballard's up to and figgers it'll be forty-eight hours before she can put her plan into effect, and that's why we should act sudden," Cal suggested.

"Betty isn't supposed to know we plan to drive sheep across her range," Ron answered. "If she should find out, she could stop us cold before we got started. Stampede a flock anywhere along here and you know what would happen."

Cal nodded. Sheep would tumble over cliffs like a waterfall, and from the distance it would look like a waterfall—one that spilled dirty gray water.

"I hear a horse!" Cal said.

He raced to a shoulder of rock, with Ron at his heels.

"If it's somebody prowling around, we'll get the jump on 'em," Ron said. "I've been accused of kidnaping. This time I'll get the game as well as the name."

"Why not?" Cal whispered. "It's Betty Ballard!"

"I'll be hanged," Ron said.

Betty walked to the edge of the ledge and looked down, then as she turned to walk back to her horse, she saw the two men.

"Oh, hello," she said calmly. "You've done quite a job of building a trail, Ron. It must have cost a barrel of money."

"It did," Ron answered, and waited.

"If you want to," she invited, "there's no reason why you shouldn't drive your sheep over Box B range."

"There's a trick in this somewhere," Cal whispered. "It reminds me of that nursery song." He hummed, "'Won't you come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly?' "

Ron Davis regarded Betty curiously. It seemed incredible that her offer to let him drive sheep over Box B range could be on the level. From the first she had been unfriendly, partly because she hated sheepmen, but mostly because she believed that Ed Davis, Ron's uncle, had killed her father.

Ron had planned to drive his sheep across Ballard range to the highway in a surprise move. Now he was being granted permission. Cal Lawrence, a sheepman born and bred, was doubly suspicious.

"She's a spider, Ron," he insisted, in a low voice which Betty could not hear from where she stood, "though a beautiful one. You're a fly and she's inviting you into her parlor. It's a trap."

BETTY was looking down on the trail that Ron had blasted out of Sheep Valley. It was apparent that her range blocked use of the valley as a permanent proposition, to everyone, unless they first got a permit from her to drive sheep out of or into the valley. By refusing permission, she could force Ron Davis to sell his sheep and the valley itself to her at her own price. It would be a quick way, Ron realized, for her to improve the Ballard financial condition. Yet she was offering to give up this advantage.

It didn't make sense.

"Well," he told Cal, "she knows what we're up to, and she can stop us if she brings in enough men. So why not accept her offer and hope to get our sheep through before she springs the trap—if there is a trap?"

"I guess it sizes up about that way," Cal admitted.

Ron walked over to Betty. "We'll gamble on shoving them through," he answered.

"You may be gambling on getting them up that trail," she told him, "but you aren't gambling on me."

"I've gambled on you since I was a small boy," Ron answered, half-seriously. "Some of these days I hope you'll gamble on me."

She made no answer, but gave the lower country a final glance, then returned to her horse.

"That gal's got plenty of brains," Cal Lawrence said, "She looks more like a cowgirl every day. Too bad she isn't a boy. The Box B might develop into a first-rate spread again."

"You can shed tears if you want to over her not being a boy," Ron answered. "I'm plenty satisfied to have the Betty Ballard as is."

They dropped down the trail to the valley floor where herders were separating the sheep that were to go out from those that were to remain. The dogs, smarter than the herders to a cattleman's way of thinking, were moving about in response to commands. Now and then a herder would take a hand when the sheep bunched too tightly, and break them up.

"Let's start 'em up the trail," Ron said.

The herders and dogs put on the pressure, and Ron thought of water backed up behind a dam. The trail was the spillway. One animal started up the trail, then they began following, some pressing so hard that they leaped up and fell back on the others, sometimes being carried along before they squeezed into position again. "They're like dirty water," Ron remarked. "Except that they're flowing up hill."

Back and forth, following the meanderings of the trail, they moved. Some showed an inclination to climb up steep banks. The dogs would watch them curiously. Sometimes they drove them into line. Again, the sheer cliffs forced them back.

"We made a big mistake," Cal said suddenly. "We should've sent our toughest men ahead to fight off cattlemen who might be waiting at the top to stampede them back down the trail."

Ron looked anxiously upward. A stampede on the narrow trail would send most of the flock tumbling into the canyons or the valley. Nor was there any way now for men to force themselves to the head of the flock. The sheep were too tightly packed for that. All along the way he could see rocks falling where animals too near the edge knocked rocks off in their struggles to reach safer ground.

The dirty gray stream moved more slowly as it neared the crest. Ron no longer saw individual sheep. They were merged in a twisting line reminding him of a huge snake seeking its way out of a pit.

"It's going to happen soon," Cal said, "if it happens at all. But I've been watching the sky line and I haven't seen a cattleman. They could be hiding among the rocks, though."

With packs of food and blankets on their backs, the men followed the sheep to the crest. The hundreds of small-hoofed feet, moving over solid rock sounded like rain falling on a roof. Ron liked the heavy, thundering pound of cattle hoofs better.

Cal climbed to the top of a butte and

studied the country through binoculars.

"I don't like it at all," he said, on returning. "There isn't a rider in sight. Things are too quiet to suit me. I saw other flocks on the move—McHenry's, Long's and Keys' as a guess."

"What about Soda Springs?" Ron asked. "Things quiet in that valley?"

"There isn't a steer left in the valley!" Cal exclaimed. "They must've been driven out early this morning. That's the trap—Soda Springs Valley!"

Ron began running along the edge of the flock. "Turn 'em!" he yelled at the herders. "We aren't going through Soda Springs Valley. We're taking the short cut to the highway, and we aren't stopping until after dark."

"They'll lose a lot of weight," a herder argued. "Ain't no feed along the short cut. Just scab rock and scattered bunch grass."

"They'll travel on their fat, then," Ron replied. "They've got plenty of that. I've never seen heavier sheep. . . ."

THE strange silence over the range continued all night. The sheepmen took turns watching, and with the break of day they brought in horses for Ron and his group.

"We'd better hurry all sheep along," one of them said. "I see a big bunch of beefs comin' down Cottonwood Canyon."

"Who's driving them?" Cal asked.

"Couldn't make out," the herder answered. "They don't look like riders from these parts. When I got closer one of them cut loose at me with a rifle. I took the hint."

Ron realized the significance of the man's report. Cattle coming out of Cottonwood Canyon would flow onto the main Red Coulee road, effectively blocking it—and stopping the sheep until the cattle were driven on.

"Well, Cal," he said, "I guess it's run sheep run, if we expect to use the highway."

"The devil of it is, you can't get sheep to run far—in the right direction," Cal answered. "They take their time."

"You keep 'em moving," Ron advised, "and I'll see what McHenry, Long and Keys think about things."

"You'd better let me do that," Cal answered. "McHenry can't forget that you're a cattleman at heart. He's as suspicious of you as I am of Betty Ballard. I still can't understand why she let us cross her range."

"Go ahead," Ron answered. "I'll keep things going here, which means leave everything to the herders and dogs. . . ."

Cal didn't show up until the next morning. He had a bandage around his wrist, and he was fighting mad.

"Only a scratch," he said, "but someone tried to drygulch me. I started after him, then realized that I was probably playing into his hands. I backed away from trouble."

"For the first time in your life?" Ron suggested.

"It seemed the thing to do," Cal answered. "The other sheepmen are hurrying their bands along. The country is rolling and they kept them moving all night." He removed the bandage from his wrist and checked on it. "Seems to be doing well enough. The bullet didn't go deep."

"What're the plans?"

"We'll meet down the highway and go in together. An attack on one flock means an attack on all. They want to pool losses, if any. Then if something goes wrong one outfit won't have to stand it all."

"What's the cattle set-up?"

"I had a look into Cottonwood," Cal answered, "and I saw Box B cattle in the stuff they're driving."

"The Box B is on the other side of the highway," Ron said. "How'd Ballard cattle get up there?"

"It's one more question to wonder about, along with Betty's letting us through — and your guardian angel showing up when needed," Cal told him. "I think I'll ride on ahead and sleep until you come along. I'm tuckered out."

Ron was riding Steve, his best horse, again and he felt a surge of confidence. The powerful animal could outrun any cow horse in that part of the country, and Ron was "run-minded" until the final showdown came.

He headed for a ridge that would give

him a view of all sheep and cattle moving toward Red Coulee. It was noon when he stopped beside a spring to rest his horse and fill his canteens.

"A water-hole is a good place to pick a man off," he muttered.

He got down on his knees, as if to drink, but instead looked at the picture mirrored in the quiet pool.

There was the ridge, clearly outlined, and as he watched, he saw the head and shoulders of a man appear against the sky line. The pool revealed only a minute picture, and he whirled quickly for a view of larger proportions. The man's hat was down over his eyes, and Ron caught only a picture of hat, shoulders and worn clothing. Then, warned by Ron's movement, the head and shoulders were jerked from view.

Ron filled his canteens, then set off in a dircetion that would cut in behind the spying man's probable line of retreat. But among the brush and huge boulders at the base of the ridge he must have lost the fellow.

As he pulled up at the spot where the head and shoulders had been, Ron saw letters chalked on a boulder. He read:

Thought you'd come up! Watch Squatter's Flat. If the showdown comes—that's the place.

"The guardian angel again!" Ron exclaimed.

His eyes were bright with excitement. His heart began pounding. This was the nearest he had come to the man who had helped him out of tight places, then vanished. No need to plunge down the steep slope hoping to pick up the trail, though. There were too many places for the man to hide out.

INSTEAD Ron drifted slowly to a thicket, dismounted, and watched the lower country. He heard a dislodged rock tumble at last, and noted the spot. He mounted his horse and began the descent, planning to pass, by a generous margin, the spot where the rock probably lay. It was his idea the guardian angel would play safe and remain under cover instead of trying to escape in an out-and-out race.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the rock. It had bounded several times, landed on brush which it partly flattened down. He touched Steve with the spurs and, risking both the horse and himself, galloped straight into the only possible hiding place in the immediate vicinity.

A man and horse sped out the opposite side.

"The riding fool!" Ron exclaimed in admiration a few minutes later.

The guardian angel was riding along the ridge, confident that his sure-footed horse would stay up longer than Ron's. Again and again Steve slipped on loose dirt kicked up by the horse ahead, and almost went down.

Suddenly Ron reached a level stretch, and saw the man and horse for the first time. The rider wasn't merely sitting in the saddle letting the horse take him away. He was helping the animal maintain its balance, by throwing the weight of his body about.

"Steve!" Ron exclaimed. "You're better! You can get that fellow now."

Only minutes later Ron was abreast, and the man pulled up.

"Why," he asked coldly, "are you chasing me?"

Ron could only stare.

"What're you staring at?" the man demanded sharply. "You act as if you'd seen a ghost!"

"I am," Ron thought. Aloud he said, "Uncle Ed! This is a surprise. You are supposed to have been—in a fire. Your Quail Creek cabin burned down, and—"

"It's all Greek to me," the man said.

Ron's first thought was that his Uncle Ed had received a blow on the head and didn't know who he was. Then he remembered that bones had been found in the ashes—human bones, and some of his Uncle Ed's personal belongings, such as his old key-winding watch.

"I've seen some chumps in my time," the man said, "but you've got 'em all beat. You don't look as if you had sense enough to come in out of the rain." That sounded like Uncle Ed. "Young feller, you've been drinkin' and it's gone to your head. Callin' me 'Uncle Ed'." He snorted.

"You've done me some favors," Ron said, and I wanted to thank you for them."

"I've done you some favors, have I?" he snapped. "Well, I've been known to lend a hand now and again. It would seem to me that if you had the sense nature gave geese, you would take favors done you and let well enough alone. If they were big favors, then I wouldn't say a word to *anyone* about 'em. Instead of bustin' through the brush thankin' people who don't want to be thanked, I'd hightail down to Squatter's Flat. Now—drift!"

Ron drifted.

"That's Uncle Ed all over," he mused. "He begins by bawling me out. He's crazier'n a loon of course. But what about the human bones found in the Quail Creek cabin? That could be somebody who jumped Uncle Ed and got killed. He had already been exonerated of the Major Ballard killing, but he probably figured that another one would convince people it was a habit and that he really had killed Ballard.

"Maybe he *did* kill Ballard, and it preyed on his mind until he's a mental case. Well, whatever it is, he's done a good job of hiding out. And a better job of helping me out of tight places. When this Tremper business is settled, I'll see what can be done about Uncle Ed—if I can find him.

"Then there's the property he willed. My Diablo River Ranch . . . If he isn't dead, the property is his." He laughed suddenly. "Wait'll the beloved cousins hear about this, particularly Jed and Hank!"

XV

JUST before Ron overtook his outfit, the various flocks had stopped for the night. Cal, tough-looking and needing a shave, had slept most of the afternoon, the entire flock passing where he had camped, without awakening him.

"Cal," Ron said, "you're a tight-lipped hombre, and I'm going to tell you something that'll make your hair curl. Keep it under your hat. The guardian angel is my Uncle Ed!"

A cigarette popped from Cal's lips and threatened to set fire to his shirt.

"Who's crazy now?" he demanded.

"He might be—I don't know," Ron answered, then related details. "And what's more," he concluded, "according to him we're liable to run into trouble on Squatter's Flat."

"Squatter's Flat was made for trouble," Cal said. "I suppose Indians fought there. I know white men have fought Indians; rustler has fought rustler; cattlemen and sheepmen have fought it out there. I guess there have been brawls between different sheep outfits, too."

Ron knew recent history of the flat. A squatter had taken up a section of ground there years ago, which had given him control of the entire flat because the only spring big enough to irrigate the entire area was on his section. He could sell water to them, or let the excess seep into the ground, which was exactly what he did when they refused to pay his high prices.

Eventually someone had killed the squatter. But the killer had been regarded as a public benefactor and no one had bothered to learn his identity.

The area since then seemed to be jinxed. Whoever tried to hold it ran into trouble. As a result it was owned by the county, which had taken it for nonpayment of taxes.

The highway crossed the flat and branch roads led to the Box B and on to the upper Diablo River country, while roads and trails turning in the oppsite direction taped the Cottonwood country and lesser known areas occupied by small ranchers. The main highway continued on to Red Coulee. On the edge of town, branches had been provided which carried cattle and sheep traffic direct to the railroad sidings.

Supposedly the creek which meandered through Cottonwood Valley, often sinking into the sand, was the source of Squatter's Flat spring. But the creek never reached the flat on the surface.

The advance guard of sheep were within a half mile of the flat an hour after sunrise the following morning. Ron had ridden to a nearby hill at sunup to check on the cattle.

"We'll be on the flat ahead of the beef," he reported to Cal on his return.

Cal could see that Ron felt a sense of relief. He knew that while Ron had given the best in him to organize and lead the sheepmen, he didn't relish the idea of fighting his own breed of man.

As the first sheep crowded into a narrow point between rugged hills on the Cottonwood side of the road, and the rough country on the opposite side, rifles cracked. The front rank of sheep dropped. The others began milling about while the dogs, frantic, tried to turn them the way they thought they should go.

The dogs made bluffs at nipping their charges. When this didn't produce results they slashed lightly at the sheep's sides and ears, momentarily checking the stampede.

Ron, riding low, sent Steve through the heavy cover of trees and brush running up a nearby slope. He saw bullets clipping twigs ahead of him and he had an idea they were clipping other twigs above and behind him. He alternately began slowing down, then going faster, hoping the change of pace would spoil his attackers' fire.

He threw himself from the saddle, taking his rifle from the boot as he left. Crouching, he led his horse behind a boulder, then worked his way to a point overlooking the men who had stopped the sheep.

It didn't seem reasonable that they hadn't left someone to guard against the very move that he had made. He turned in time to see a line of twigs and leaves falling. A bullet had already passed him. He rolled behind a rock and waited. A second bullet passed through a leaf three feet to his left. Ron crawled to the leaf and noticed a second leaf thirty feet beyond, with a similar hole in it.

HE WORKED his way to the partial protection of a rock, rested his gun, and lined his sights up with the two holes in the leaves. The effect was as if Ron was aiming along a thirty-foot rifle barrel equipped with two open and two glove sights. He saw nothing but brush and rocks, but he squeezed the trigger and the brush above stirred violently.

"I'm shot!" a voice bellowed. "I'm shot!" A man leaped into the open, pale as a ghost, pleading, "Don't shoot me again!"

"Well!" Ron exclaimed to himself. "If it isn't Lambie! His partner, Honey Pie, must be around somewhere." He yelled, "Lambie, come here!"

The man was too frightened over his wound to argue the point, or object to the nickname. He slunk up.

"I should shoot you in your tracks," Ron said. "You blasted . . . Where's Honey Pie? If you lie to me I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do."

"He's with Tremper," the man chattered. "Am I goin' to die?"

"The instant a sheepman is killed you're a killer because you're in cahoots with the man who does the shooting. Now get out of here. . . . Wait! Come back here!"

He searched the man for a six-gun, and found only an empty shoulder holster. He drew his knife and slashed Lambie's pants to ribbons, cut his boots down the back.

"Now clear out!" he said.

Ron crawled through the brush and opened fire on the men gathered below. One dropped, and the others fled. He couldn't see them, but he could follow their progress by the violent stirrings of the brush as they fought their way to their horses.

The object was to get the sheep through before the cattle came, and he could hear the distant thunder of the advancing herd. The dead sheep were thrown into the brush, and some of the calmer animals herded into the lead. Gradually the dogs and men got the different flocks moving again.

A wounded sheepman came up to Ron.

"Take a look," he said. "I can't seem to stop the bleedin'."

"I'll bandage it!" Ron said. He did a quick job of it, and asked, "Your gun arm?"

"Yeah."

"Take your six-gun in your other

hand, and come with me. See this thing that's just crawled from under a rock where he lives with the slugs and sow bugs?" He indicated Lambie. "He's your prisoner. He'll talk later to save his hide. Just see that he don't get away. Think you can handle him?"

"I hope he tries to get away," the sheepman said. "The way my wound hurts I want to kill a Tremper man to get even."

"He's a Tremper man, and he lied to Betty Ballard and said I'd hired him to kidnap her. Didn't you, Lambie?" Ron half advanced.

"Yeah," Lambie whimpered. "Tremper's orders. He wanted to get you on the kidnapin' charge if he couldn't hang a killin' on you."

Ron realized he was needed up ahead, but he couldn't pass up this chance to get information in the presence of a witness.

"Come clean," he ordered. "It won't help you with the authorities, but a confession might make the sheepmen go easier on you. What was the deal?"

"Tremper knowed you and Betty was in the valley and he was afraid you'd get together and there'd be no trouble between the cattlemen and sheepmen. Then she swiped your raft. Well, Tremper had me and some others down there in case you two showed up. We were supposed to kidnap you both. We grabbed her when she landed near Little River. We took her to the Arrerhead Creek hideout, then one of us reports to Tremper. He says for us to make like you'd give us orders to grab her in case the two of you didn't come downstream together."

"How did you put it over?"

"By pretendin' to be talkin' amongst ourselves so she'd overhear what we said," Lambie replied. "We'd say, 'If she gets away, Davis will give us whatfor!' Or, 'Davis is a smooth one, and he pays plenty. I like to work for him.'"

"Then after I moved in and she got away, Tremper ordered you to pretend to confess and turn state's evidence?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, that's it," Lambie admitted.

"It looks as if Tremper is licked now," Ron suggested, "and being a kind of a lobo you're out to save yourself."

That barb got under Lambie's skin. "The wound kind of took the fight out of me, I guess," he mumbled. "And I ain't no bigger lobo than Tremper."

"Lambie," Ron said with a mirthless smile, "I never thought we'd agree on anything, but we sure do agree on that. Remember what you've just confessed in a witness' presence. You may have to tell that story over again in court."

RON rode up front again, but this wasn't his day to take things easy. Cal yelled and pointed.

"Cattle stampede! They're headin' into the sheep!"

The brush was thick, but there were few trees and Ron could see tossing horns as the steers leaped over obstructions. The brush was flattening before their pounding hoofs.

"Let's turn 'em!" Ron yelled at anyone within sound of his voice.

"Turn 'em in front of the sheep!" a sheepman answered. "And keep 'em goin'. There's a twenty-five foot cliff on the edge of the flat. Not high, but high enough to break necks." He was white with fury because he hated all cattlemen and now they were sending steers against his sheep, sacrificing good beef to destroy mutton and get a grasp on the land.

"We'll try and turn 'em before they hit the sheep," Ron said. "If they go through the flock, we'll turn 'em anyway."

"I'm blowed if I'll keep 'em away from that cliff!" the sheepman yelled. "All my life I've wanted to get even. Look at 'em! Fat Box B steers from Soda Springs range. Sent here to kill sheep!"

Murmurs of rage swept through the sheepmen's ranks.

"Ike is right!" the voices of several men yelled back.

Cal Lawrence had turned purple with rage, and he tossed fighting words about freely.

"You agreed to follow Ron's orders," he concluded. "Now you'll do it or stamp yourself as welchers. You'll be

what cattlemen think most sheepmen are. I told you Ron's idea. Nobody's held anything back from you."

"The devil with them!" Ron shouted savagely over his shoulder. "We haven't time to chew the rag!"

They galloped toward the herd, and as they neared it, riders, yelling and shooting to build up terror, pulled up. Ron recognized Beefy, and thought he saw Tremper. Then he let the animals come abreast and spurred Steve into action. Cal was behind him.

Ron shot the nearest steer, then the next one beyond him. Those behind stumbled over the falling bodies and others began swerving. The distance between the cattle and sheep dwindled alarmingly.

"We can't turn 'em soon enough!" Cal yelled. "Watch out or we'll be caught. Look ahead!"

Ron understood. Their horses would hit the flock at full speed. They might make one leap, or possibly two, then the animals would trip over the sheep and before men and horses could extricate themselves the cattle would be on them. It was either pull out and let the cattle tear through the sheep, then go on over the cliff, or gamble on racing ahead of the stampede, skirting the advance guard of sheep, then cutting back and making a second attempt to turn the cattle toward town.

It was asking a lot of horses, but Ron thought Steve could do it. Cal had equal confidence in his own mount. A couple of sheepmen who had joined them knew that their horses were not equal to it, and pulled out.

As Ron angled across in front of the cattle there were moments when he could almost feel the breath of the nearest steers. Ears back, mane and tail flying, Steve put everything he had into the fun. He cleared the cattle by a narrow margin, ran a hundred yards parallel to the advance guard of sheep, then cut across in front of the flock.

Angry sheepmen saw the cattle cut a lane through their flock. Sheep were tossed high into the air as the steers hit them. Steers stumbled and fell, going end over end. Above all there was a bedlam of frightened bleating and bellowing.

The sheep advance guard cut off from the main flock followed a leader to the rough country away from the road. The dogs, despairing of regaining control, stayed with them.

Impact with the sheep slowed the stampede somewhat and gave Ron and Cal a chance to get back on the right hand side of the cattle. Cal suddenly pointed.

"There's a Tremper man who's getting justice!" he yelled. "He's caught among the steers."

Dust all but obscured the man at times. Ron couldn't understand how the horse kept its footing. Again and again the mount stumbled, and was almost knocked down as a steer directly ahead pitched off to the left. The horse saw an opening and leaped, landing among dead sheep, then cleared a fringe of live ones and swung in behind Cal Lawrence.

"Maybe the devil's with the cuss!" Cal yelled at Ron.

"That's the Box B boss," Ron called over his shoulder, "Buck Young. Let him play out his hand, but have your gun handy."

BUCK YOUNG immediately indicated that he was trying to save the fat Box B cattle that had survived.

"That puts him on our side for a while!" Ron yelled.

"He's a reckless cuss!" Cal shouted.

Buck Young didn't seem to care whether he survived or not, and he set a pace that curled Ron's hair.

"No cussed Tremper man's going to show me up!" Cal shouted, and took a few suicidal chances himself.

The brink of the cliff lay just beyond a fringe of brush a quarter-mile ahead. It was evident that Buck Young was going to turn the cattle, or go over the brink with them. When he found a steer that would turn even slightly to the left, he crowded him. If a critter was stubborn, his six-gun dropped him.

It looked to Ron as if Steve, his own horse, was within five yards of the cliff edge at times. Then they had the steers

running parallel with the cliff, and finally they were definitely edging away. All along sheepmen were keeping the cattle away from the brink.

As the stragglers disappeared toward town, Ron and Cal rode back to the scene of the clash between sheep and cattle. There were animals to be killed because they had broken legs; other animals to be herded out of thickets and other bad spots where they had taken refuge. Wild-eyed steers snorted and charged anything that moved. But by late afternoon Ron and the sheepmen got the steers into a bunch and headed them toward Red Coulee.

"We can't do much with the sheep," Cal said. "They're scattered from Hades to breakfast."

THE sheepmen who gathered around the campfire that night were mostly owners. And they were resentful almost to a man.

"We had the chance of a lifetime to get even without lifting a hand," one of them declared, "and we blew the chance. All we had to do was to let those steers go over the cliff. That's all. Instead, we turned 'em away from it. I'm no hero, and don't want to be, but I know when I'm risking my life. There were a dozen times today when I wouldn't have given two-bits for my chances. And for what? Cussed if I know. I obeyed orders because I'd promised Cal Lawrence I'd do what Ron Davis—a cattleman. his ownself—wanted done."

"Ron isn't going to let you down," Cal answered. He turned to Ron and asked, "What's next?"

"We're starting now to clean out the Tremper gang," Ron answered.

"They're miles from here by now," a sheepman argued.

"We want to get them, don't we?" Ron asked sharply. "So miles make no difference. But I don't think they've gone far. Their plans went haywire."

"Ron's right," Cal said. "They counted on sheepmen letting cattle go to tunket today. Instead, we crossed them up. Or Ron did. They figured that cattlemen, stung by the loss of their steers, would take their spite out on sheepmen who were stung themselves by the loss of their sheep. When things like this have happened before the factions have gone at each other's throats. But Ron isn't a short haul man; he's long haul. And from the first he's looked at this deal as a five-year, or twenty-year haul."

"That's what I've been driving at," Ron said. "I don't like sheep. You don't like cattle. Some fellows don't like blondes, and others don't like the dark girls, but they're all necessary. Here's the play. Sheep supply clothes; cattle supply shoes; both supply meat. I've learned, much to my surprise, that sheepmen aren't what I'd been led to believe. I hope you haven't noticed a forked tail and horns on me."

"You're different," a sheepman remarked. "You've knocked around the world."

"And I'm trying to cash in on that experience," Ron said. "We've all learned something. There's no reason why sheepmen and cattlemen can't sit around the same table and work out a division of the range so that the Diablo River country will produce plenty of shoes, clothes and meat. . . . But wait! There is a reason."

"What?" a sheepman asked.

"Trig Tremper," Ron said. "We can't talk business if someone is stirring up trouble. Let's clean 'em out. I've an idea Trig and his gunman gang will get together at Conway's cabin and decide whether to fight it through or scatter and try the same deal later on in another part of the country."

"The sheep are here, the cars are waiting for them and we should get all the strays bunched and started for them cars," a sheepman remarked. "But that's the short-haul idea. We'll make more money in the long run takin' care of Tremper now. I'll string along with Ron Davis. What about you other fellows?"

One by one they swung into line.

"That's fine," Ron said. "Now take to the hills and everybody converge on Conway's cabin. I'm going to town and see if I can't get a little help."

"It'll take more than a *little* help," Cal Lawrence observed.

XVI

RON unhurriedly followed the herd into Red Coulee. It was badly broken up, with numerous strays in thickets back from the road. There were several questions that he wanted to ask, cold turkey. One of them was—what was Bar B and Broken Triangle cattle doing in country remote from the home range, unless the beefs had deliberately been sent there to take part in a planned stampede? Offhand, it looked as if the sheep-hating ranchers had each tossed steers into a common pot.

He found the Broken Triangle owner at the stable getting a fresh horse.

"Listen, you sheep-lovin'—" the rancher began as soon as he saw Ron.

"Hold it!" Ron cut in. "And tell me what your cattle were doing so far from home."

"Driven off the range by sheepmen who wanted it to look as if I was jumping them, that's what!" growled the cowman angrily.

"You're hot under the collar right now," Ron said, "or you'd think this thing through and decide that your remark doesn't make sense. Your cattle are strung all along the road. They'd have been in a heap over the Squatter's Flat cliff if it hadn't been for sheepmen. Now suppose you hold your fire until you see the whites of their eyes, then maybe faces will look a little different. My hunch is that Tremper's men rustled your beef as part of a general scheme."

"Tremper's kept to himself ever since he came into this country," the rancher argued. "People blame him for everything just because he's new around here, and not a cowman or a sheepman."

"Hold your final conclusion on that a while longer," Ron urged. "Pick up what cattlemen you can find and light out for the sheepmen's camp. You'd better go with an open mind. If there isn't a lot of horse sense used in the next forty-eight hours a lot of ranchers are going to lose their shirts. I said *ranchers*, not sheepmen nor cattlemen. See you later."

As he rounded the corner he ran into two of his cousins. In the will Uncle Ed had designated them as "Greedy Jed" and "Plotting Hank."

"What're you getting out of all this work you're doing?" Jed sourly demanded. "They tell me you used up enough powder blasting out a trail from Sheep Valley to buy yourself a flock of sheep."

"I'm getting an education. How's the brick-yard business?"

"There's a way to break that will," Jed answered, "and I'm going to find it."

"We're working together," Hank said. "I've figured out a scheme."

"Working together, eh?" Ron cheerfully observed. "I thought you usually were knifing each other in the back. How's the old mine deal, by the way?"

"The estate can have the mine," Hank retorted.

"I'd like to hear more," Ron said, "but quite a little work has developed lately."

He took the steps up to Webb's office three at a time, and found the lawyer studying.

"Here's a legal problem to sink your teeth in," Ron said. "Man dies, leaves an estate, which is distributed. Then it turns out that the man isn't dead."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Webb demanded.

"Uncle Ed is still alive. I saw him. He denied his identity. Keep it under your hat. I can't figure it out myself, but we'll get together as soon as we have a breathing spell."

Normally Webb never lacked for the right words at the right time, but Ron left him going through the motions of asking questions, though his lips gave forth no sound.

As Ron hit the sidewalk, laughing, a second-story window flew open and Webb yelled down:

"All property is still his, Ron! You could put in a claim for compensation for services performed."

"I can," Ron answered, "but I won't. It's all part of my education."

Ron's only thought now was to finish the job and move on. He had built a lot of his early plans around Betty Ballard, and she had proved a bitter disappointment. If she hadn't faith in him, if she couldn't see through a man like Tremper, then she wasn't the sort of girl to weather the tough storms Ron expected to face, off and on, as long as he lived.

HE WENT over to the newspaper office and found Tweed setting type.

"How would you like a good yarn?" he asked.

"I've had a lot of good yarns lately," Tweed answered, "but I can always use a better one."

"Get on your nag and ride to Conway's cabin," Ron suggested. "I may be giving you a false lead, but it's worth a gamble. It may be the finish of the Tremper gang."

"I hope the man isn't killed," Tweed said. "When a man of his type is killed he becomes a sort of legend. In a few years they'll have him robbing the rich and distributing the money among the poor. They'll never credit him with trying to take over a section of America and run it to suit himself. Brought to trial, stripped of a lot of glamour that he's managed to hang on himself, he'll look insignificant. . . . Well, it looks as if the paper will be late again. Why can't you manage this headline business well in advance of my press time, Ron?"

Ron grinned and said, "Come along. You'll pick up a small item that'll wind up my business for a little while."

Tweed followed Ron to the sheriff's office. Ron got to the point at once.

"Sheriff," he said, "you've never missed a chance to get on the band wagon, though you've had some close calls."

Sheriff Burns said nothing, and little of that.

"Here's a list of men," Ron continued, "that I'd like appointed deputy sheriffs."

The sheriff read the list and snorted. "Sheepmen," he said. "I wouldn't appoint one of 'em a deputy—"

"Read again," Ron said. "You'll see cattlemen's names on the list. The idea is, the bunch of us expect to corner Tremper and his crowd. If we're legal deputies it will look better."

"I'm taking care of law and order in this town," the sheriff declared hotly.

"Since when?" Ron asked. He shrugged, and added, "You've had your chance. Come on, Mr. Tweed."

Tweed shook his head in disgust. "Sheriff," he said, "I like a blithering idiot, but you suit me too well."

A block from the sheriff's office they heard hurrying footsteps. It was Sheriff Burns.

"I've been thinking it over," he said. "I'll appoint those fellows special deputy sheriffs."

"And I want to be chief deputy for forty-eight hours," Ron said, "so that I can appoint additional men if needed. They'll be appointed on the scene of action. And I'll leave my resignation with you so you won't have any trouble getting rid of me. How about it?"

"Come back to the office," the sheriff said. "If I wasn't just getting over a sick spell, and if my old wound wasn't hurting, I'd give this a whirl myself."

"You take care of yourself," Ron drawled. "The community can't afford to lose you."

"You never lose a chance to get in a punch do you?" Sheriff Burns grumbled.

"Not when a man leads with his chin," Ron answered.

When they were outside of the sheriff's office again, Tweed said, "I feel the need of a drink. Let's go over to the Water-hole."

They found things quiet in the saloon. The bartenders were gone and Foghorn Carrigan personally was taking care of the needs of the thirsty. He served them and observed:

"Where're all my customers?"

"We're going to cut down a few of your customers," Ron said. "Things have reached the showdown. The way it shapes up now, one group of your customers has another group surrounded."

"Who's got who surrounded?"

"A bunch of sheepmen and cattlemen have cornered Tremper," Ron answered.

"Count me in on this," Foghorn said. "I won't stand for fightin' around my place, but out on the range is somethin' else." He reached for his billiard balls. "These are better'n six-guns," he explained. "Sometimes you want to take 'em alive. . . ."

Ron Davis, Foghorn Carrigan and Tweed made camp a mile below Conway's cabin, at two o'clock in the morning.

"If we get any closer," Ron said, "either side might pick us off. We'll turn in until daylight." He rolled up in his blankets and was asleep in a few minutes.

Foghorn and Tweed weren't as far behind on their sleep and it was nearly daylight before they dozed off. They were awakened by Ron.

"I smell bacon and coffee," he said.

THEY washed up at a spring and followed their noses a hundred yards.

"Hyah, Foghorn," a sheepman called. "Why didn't you bring your bar along? I could enjoy about three fingers of corn liquor on a mornin' like this."

"What is the set-up?" Ron asked.

"We came in on the clearin' as per your orders," the sheepman said. "Then bedded down. Some of us slept, some kept watch. The rule was—let anybody into the trap that wants to get in, but don't let nobody out. Three, four men rode in durin' the night. Cal Lawrence crawled up about ten o'clock and listened. They're all there, with Tremper runnin' things. It seems like they can't agree on what to do next. Some claim we ain't got a thing on 'em, and the best bet is to walk out, hands up and say, 'We'll stand trial. Just try and convict us.' Others figgered Ron must have plenty on 'em, or we wouldn't be tough all of a sudden."

"They know what they've done and that helps break down their confidence," Ron said. "And Tremper's smart enough to know he has the peaceful, patient men against him now. When you stir up citizens who want only to be let alone to go about their business you've a fight on your hands."

They invited them to share their flapjacks, bacon and coffee. Cal showed up as Ron was finishing.

"I'm going to swear you all in as deputies," Ron said. "That makes us law-enforcing men instead of men who've taken the law into their own hands."

He went from group to group swearing in the men. Circling Conway's cabin at a half-mile distance involved nearly a four-mile walk. By the time he had finished the men were beginning to move in. At nine o'clock Ron stepped into the clearing, hands in the air, gun holsters empty.

"Tremper, I want to talk to you," he said. "I'm a deputy sheriff."

"Spill it," Tremper ordered. He didn't show himself, but stood near an open window and shouted.

"I'm here to arrest you on conspiracy, and several other charges," Ron said. "We're giving you and your outfit a chance to give up without adding to the charges by resisting arrest."

"Come and get us," Tremper said, "if you're ready to pay the price. You're out to frame us and we know it."

"Is that final?"

"You figure it out," Tremper taunted. "You've got ten seconds to get under cover."

Ron made it in nine, and rifle bullets ripped through the thicket that concealed him. Then rifles on all sides opened up. Window panes fairly exploded under the impact of lead, and the stove-pipe protruding above the roof poured out wood smoke through a dozen bullet-holes.

The fact that surprise was complete was evident, for their horses were bunched under a big shed, and no guards were on trails leading to the clearing.

Firing on both sides ended suddenly. The deputies and the Tremper outfit were saving ammunition. Too many bullets were ending up in log walls, or the brush and timber surrounding the clearing.

"I guess we'll have to rush 'em," Cal

said to Ron. "It'll be a bad business after our first man falls because then every Tremper man will know he's fighting to escape the noose. What do you think?"

"Tremper's already got one or more killings on his conscience, or he wouldn't resist," Ron answered. "We've got family men in our ranks. I'd hate to see them killed. Growing kids need their old man, and a woman needs her husband to run the ranch."

"What's the matter with us single men rushing the cabin?" Cal suggested. "If you could close to the north wall, and me the south wall, we could shoot through the windows and get most of 'em. We'd only expose our hands when we shot. There'd be a lot of misses but they couldn't duck forever."

"Just forget all that," one of the ranchers said quietly. "A married man has more of a stake than a single one. If there's any rushing done, we'll do it together."

"What about tonight?" another asked. "In the darkness they couldn't spot us."

"In the darkness some of them would sift through," Ron argued. "We've got 'em all now. Once they scatter some of 'em never will be caught."

"If we fired the brush," Cal suggested, "the flames would sweep across the clearing and might touch off the cabin."

Ron shook his head. "Their horses are tied. They'd be badly burned before they broke their ropes. Fire's out."

"I hadn't thought about the nags," Cal said.

RON studied the situation.

"I've an idea," he said at last. "It might work. Somebody came in a spring wagon. Where is it?"

"Half-mile down the road," a sheepman said. "It's mine."

"We'll pay you for it," Ron said. "Can you bring it up to the fringe of timber on the high side of the clearing?"

"Sure."

"Don't show yourself. You'll pick up a slug."

While the man was gone, Ron sent word that he wanted every lariat within reach. Lariats were relayed from group to group until Ron was surrounded with them. With Cal's help he tied them together, coiling them up like a rope. Leaving three or four men to watch the cabin, the others began gathering dry grass in a clearing that had once been a hayfield.

They loaded it onto the spring wagon, packing it down by criss-crossing it with well-dried limbs. They piled the load high, then lashed it into place with barbed wire. Ron tied the lariats to the wagon tongue, then as the others put their shoulders to the wheels, Ron snubbed the rope around a tree and paid it out a little at a time. The pull kept the tongue, and therefore, the front wheels straight. Just before the load rolled into the open, Cal touched a match to the top. He didn't want it burning too fast.

The Tremper men saw it coming, and opened fire, hoping to cut the rope and let the load run wild. Nearer and nearer it came to the cabin. "Get buckets!" they could hear Tremper yelling. "When the load hits, drench it with water."

When the load was twenty feet from the cabin, Ron held fast for several minutes to give the flames a chance to build up into sheets of solid fire. Suddenly he slacked away and the wagon struck the cabin wall.

Cal's rifle went to his shoulder as the first man fled from the blazing cabin. Then he lowered it. The man's hands were high in the air. He had the temper of the deputies gaged perfectly. He knew there was not one in the lot who would shoot down an unarmed man.

The others followed, Tremper among them, hands upraised, scattering like quail, hoping to confuse the ring of deputies. Each man thought he might escape while the others were being caught.

"Grab 'em before they reach the brush!" Ron yelled.

He knew there might be men in the cabin, waiting with loaded rifles, but it was a chance they had to take. Empty-handed the Tremper men sprinted into the clearing.

"Pick your man and stay with him," Ron ordered. "Don't grab just anyone!"

XVII

OBEYING Ron Davis' orders, Foghorn Carrigan was the first to act. Winding up, he let go with a billiard ball. Atwood's head was the target and Foghorn scored a bull's eye. Atwood dropped onto his face and didn't move. Ron was after Tremper, but the man was fast on his feet, and in superb physical condition. On ground of his own choosing Tremper whirled. Behind them they could hear the shouts of men engaged in finish fights, while above the crackle of flames they heard ammunition exploded as the heat reached the discarded guns.

"I'd like to have shot it out with you, Tremper!" Ron called.

"You're a fool, Davis!" Tremper yelled back. "Never let your man choose his own weapons. I'm a trained boxer, among other things." He viewed the encounter with satisfaction. "What are the rules?"

"No rules," Ron answered. "You've never lived up to a rule in your life when the chips were down."

Something stabbed him in the right eye and Ron knew that Tremper had a vicious left jab. It came again and again, rocking his head back, keeping him off-balance, giving him no chance to get set. He let one bounce off his head, then waded in. He felt Tremper's jaw bend under his own right cross, then a stomach blow buckled his knees and drained strength from his legs. He covered up when Tremper came in for the kill, and whipped a left hook into the stomach.

Tremper's jaw came down and Ron got him with a right cross again. The man rolled with the punch, and it lost much of its power. There were no rounds, no referee, no rules against low blows. Tremper hit Ron low just once and got one back that turned his face green.

"Keep your punches up," Ron growled.

He worked on Tremper's stomach, then tried the right cross again. His fist almost shifted the man's nose an inch off-base. Ron almost went down from a stomach punch, and for a moment the two stepped back, breath coming in sharp gasps, each wondering why the other didn't fall.

"Well-matched," a voice said, and Ron saw that it was Buck Young who had spoken near them. "My money is on Davis, though."

"One of your imports, Tremper," Ron taunted. "Not very loyal."

"He isn't Buck Young," Tremper panted.

The slugging match continued. Ron's legs were like lead, and he was growing arm weary. But he saw less confidence in Tremper's eyes, and that lashed him to greater efforts. The man's blows no longer carried a sting. His jaw grew slack, and traits in his character that he kept under cover began creeping to the surface. His eyes were cold with craft when they were not clouded by the fog from Ron's blows.

He staggered back at last and his arms dropped.

"Don't hit me again, Davis," he panted. "I'm through."

Ron thought, "I'm through from the feel of things."

Then Tremper's hand went to a back pocket and he whipped out a short-barreled bulldog revolver.

The difference between a champion and a bum is the fact that the champion has something left in an emergency. Ron's left hand knocked the weapon aside before Tremper could pull the trigger. He didn't remember swinging at Tremper's jaw with his right hand. It was instinctive. He felt the bones of his hand bend under the impact, then Tremper was sprawled on the dirt, the bulldog firing twice because the man's finger worked convulsively. Ron got the gun, then he sat down.

After a while he lashed Tremper's wrists together, then helped the man to his feet. Ron looked at Buck Young, wondering what he might do, but the Box B foreman did nothing.

Ron headed his prisoner back to the clearing. It looked as if there had been fighting all over the place. Brush and grass were tramped down, there were

shreds of cloth, even of flesh, along with buttons and tufts of hair scattered about.

"Let's head for town," Ron said. "We made a hundred per cent haul."

"I didn't," Tweed complained. "I didn't see the fight between Tremper and you. I'm a fine newspaper man."

"I saw it," Buck Young said. "I'll tell you about it. Best fist fight I ever saw. You've had training, Davis."

"Yeah," Ron answered. "I learned to fist-fight in the Chicago stockyards. Tremper didn't know that when he chose his own weapons."

IT WAS a strange group that rode to Red Coulee. Sheepmen and cattlemen dropped out as they came to flocks or bunched cattle, but ranchers, riding out because they had heard a fight was going on, took their places, and the guards remained about the same in numbers when Ron arrived at the jail.

"Here you are, Sheriff," he said. "And be sure that they don't get away, or you'll have all of Diablo County on your neck. I'm going over to the hotel to clean up and get a night's sleep. Cal, will you get the sheepmen and cattlemen together at a meeting tomorrow? I'd like to hit the trail tomorrow night, but I want to know that those hombres are pulling together, and are raising meat, shoes and clothes instead of ructions."

"Cal's tired," Buck Young said. "I'll do it."

"And who are you?" Ron asked.

"I'm temporarily Buck Young, but actually Tip Logan. I married a schoolmate of Betty Ballard's. Betty sent for me to run the Box B, saying I'd have to pose as Buck Young. Well, with a wife and baby, and out of a job I'd have posed as Billy the Kid."

"The Box B is in good hands," Ron said.

"I'm a hairpin that has to size up all angles before I join one side or the other," "Tip" Logan said. "That's why I was a kind of spectator."

"How'd you happen to be around when the cattle stampeded through the sheep?"

"Well, some of Tremper's bunch hazed most of the Soda Springs cattle over into the Cottonwood country," Logan explained. "I guess the idea was to bust the Ballards, and use their steers to kill off your sheep. When I found that bunch of cattle, they were mixed up with beef Tremper had tricked ranchers into driving to market because the price was supposed to drop. I'd been in a stampede or two before and knew a couple of tricks."

"And your tricks turned the cattle," Ron said.

"Cal Lawrence and you didn't act as if you were out for a ride," Logan drawled. "You go get your rest and let me pack the load a while. Big-hearted Tip, they call me." He grinned. "Always picking up the load when it's light. . . ."

It was noon when Ron awoke and looked at his face.

"Only a face that a mother could love," he growled. "I can't shave it."

He went down and gave the barber a tough job.

"You stopped a lot of punches, didn't you?" the barber said.

"Yep," Ron answered. "Led with my chin."

He went to the hotel dining room as soon as the barber was finished.

"I guess I'll eat in one of the private boxes," he told the waiter. "This face of mine won't draw trade."

As soon as he had given his order, the box curtains parted and Betty Ballard stepped in.

"Good afternoon, darling," she said.

"Trying to be funny?" Ron growled. That "darling" had given him a real kick, and he was annoyed because there was no affection behind the word.

"I'm inviting myself to dinner," she said. "I told the waiter I'd take the same."

"What put you on the right trail?" he asked, as he quickly arose and seated her. "I'm supposed to have kidnaped you."

"Ron, I knew that you were really rescuing me that time in Arrowhead Valley," she confessed. "But Lambie and Honey Pie, with their talk about working for you, puzzled me, and I won-

dered what was behind it. Then I began to wonder about Tremper, so I decided to play dumb—which wasn't hard for me to do—and learn what was going on. Tremper and I looked over the Box B and things were in a sorry shape. I wondered why he kept me away from the Soda Springs range, so I rode over and found out. He had the best steers on the ranch bunched there, waiting to drive them into the Cottonwood country."

"And he did," Ron said.

"I began to doubt there was a Buck Young, and it struck me I could force a showdown on that by bringing in a good man and having him pose as Buck Young. Tip Logan jumped at the chance and played the role beautifully. Tremper didn't know what to do."

"If he said there was no Buck Young, then he'd have stamped himself as a fraud." Ron chuckled.

"That's right," Betty said. "I wanted to tell you the whole story and work with you, Ron, but you were doing all right, and I thought if I pretended to be bitter toward you I'd learn more. It was hard to do, Ron, but I've gathered a lot of evidence that will help send the Tremper crowd over the road for conspiracy." She drew a long breath. "Ron, I loved the story you told about me being a sort of goal in your life. And I must've been a terrible little snip. Poor Mother, she never could understand why I'm like Dad. Dad and I loved her and we let her try to make a lady out of me, but I'm afraid I didn't take a polish that lasted."

"Go on," Ron said. "We can eat any time." Their soup was getting cold.

SHE smiled at him shyly.

"Perhaps you had better go on from here."

He told her about his Uncle Ed, then said, "I know of a ranch in the Grassy Bend country. It's run-down, but we can get it for the taxes. The bank will help us, because it's stuck with the adjoining property and would like to sell. It'll be a tough grind for several years. . . . How about it?"

"I hate to leave this country," she said, "the roots have gone deep, but—when do we start?"

"Maybe a girl wouldn't want to marry a man whose face looks as though it had gone through a meat grinder," Ron said. "Can you get ready in a week? I think my face can."

* * * * *

The church was filled and when the wedding was over Mrs. Ballard dutifully kissed her son-in-law. He was still a Davis, and always would be, but he was the best of the lot and she took consolation in that. Besides, it took men like Ron Davis and Tip Logan to run a cattle or sheep ranch. And Ron did have a way with him.

Cal Lawrence was best man, and managed to stumble over his own feet during the ceremony. Mike Tweed was thinking, "I'm going to put this wedding on the front page." And Foghorn Carrigan, uneasy in a church, had left his billiard balls behind. As he understood it, they didn't have brawls in church.

As the crowd left the church Lawyer Webb noticed a quiet figure huddled in

(Turn page)

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the corner and went over.

"Ed Davis," he chided, "what do you mean by coming back to life, and gumming things up?"

"It's like this," Ed Davis explained. "I had two worries. I wanted to find out who killed Major Ballard, and I wondered who I could leave my property to. You fixed up my will and I thought, 'I'd like to see how my heirs handle things.' So I arranged to 'die'."

"You made a good job of it, as usual," Webb said.

"I figured that if I was supposed to be dead the man who killed Ballard would grow careless. Otherwise the crime would always be laid at my door even though a coroner's jury declared me innocent. I've got the evidence, and Ron got the man—Tremper. It was his opening gun. He knew that if the major and I pulled together, he didn't have a chance, so he drygulched him."

"I'll be hanged!" murmured the lawyer.

"Did you tell Ron that if he made a go of Diablo River ranch that he was to inherit the Bar D—and the rest of the estate?"

"No. You see, Ed, Ron told me you'd popped up and therefore there'd be nothing to inherit. You inherit property from deceased people. Remember?"

"Where's my horse?" Ed Davis left the church in an undignified hurry. "Where'd Ron and Betty go?" he demanded of Mike Tweed, outside.

The editor thought he was seeing a ghost and could only point. Never in his life had he had so much news. Some of the advertisers might be crowded out. Well, what of it? He had trouble collecting from them, anyway.

Ed drew up beside the buckboard a half-hour later. It had taken time to shake off fools who insisted he was no longer on this earth.

"Hey, Ron, where do you think you're going?"

"So you've finally decided to admit you're Uncle Ed?" Ron said.

"Confound your hide!" Uncle Ed snorted. "If you had any sense you'd settle down now that you're married! Where're you going?"

"Betty and I are going up to the Grassy Bend country and do a little pioneering," Ron answered.

"Oh you are? Trying to get out of hard work, as usual. Webb didn't tell you, but my estate is yours. That includes the Bar D. Now as soon as your honeymoon is over, come back here and we'll fix up the papers."

"Betty, did you hear that?" Ron demanded.

"Of course I heard it," she said spiritedly. "And why not? You're one of the few men in this country who could really run it. Your Uncle Ed is smart."

A twinkle came into Ed Davis' old eyes. "And the estate includes a brickyard that don't pay and a mine that can't seem to show a profit," he said tartly. "Pioneering in the Grassy Bend country. Huh! If there's any pioneering done by the Davis family I'll do it myself."

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

HIGH DESERT

A Complete Action Novel by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

DUTCHMAN'S FLAT

There was an angry whine above them, then the crack of a rifle

by LOUIS L'AMOUR

THE dust of Dutchman's Flat had settled in a gray film upon their faces, and Neill could see the streaks made by the sweat on their cheeks and brows and knew his own must be the same. No man of them was smiling and they rode with their rifles in their hands, six grim and purposeful men upon the trail of a single rider.

They were men shaped and tempered to the harsh ways of a harsh land, strong in their sense of justice, ruthless in their demand for punishment, relentless in pursuit. From the desert

SIX MEN FOLLOW TELL-TALE TRACKS ON A LYNCH TRAIL

they had carved their homes, and from the desert they drew their courage and their code, and the desert knows no mercy.

"Where's he headin', you reckon?"

"Home, mostly likely. He'll need grub an' a rifle. He's been livin' on the old Sorenson place."

Kimmel spat. "He's welcome to it. That place starved out four men I know of." He stared at the hoof tracks ahead. "He's got a good horse."

"Big buckskin. Reckon we'll catch him, Hardin?"

"Sure. Not this side of his place, though. There ain't no short cuts we can take to head him off and he's pointin' for home straight as a horse can travel."

"Ain't tryin' to cover his trail none."

"No use tryin'." Hardin squinted his eyes against the glare of the sun. "He knows we figure he'll head for his ranch."

"He's no tenderfoot." Kesney expressed the thought that had been dawning upon them all in the last two hours. "He knows how to save a horse, an' he knows a trail."

They rode on in near silence. Hardin scratched his unshaven jaw. The dust lifted from the hoofs of the horses as they weaved their way through the catclaw and mesquite. It was a parched and sunbaked land, with only dancing heat waves and the blue distance of the mountains to draw them on. The trail they followed led straight as a man could ride across the country. Only at draws or nests of rocks did it swerve, where they noticed the rider always gave his horse the best of it.

No rider of the desert must see a man to know him, for it is enough to follow his trail. In these things are the ways of a man made plain, his kindness or cruelty, his ignorance or cunning, his strength and his weakness. There are indications that cannot escape a man who has followed trails, and in the two hours since they had ridden out of Freedom the six had already learned much of the man they followed. And they would learn more.

"What started it?"

The words sounded empty and alone in the vast stillness of the basin.

HARDIN turned his head slightly so the words could drift back. It was the manner of a man who rides much in the wind or rain. He shifted the rifle to his left hand and wiped his sweaty right palm on his coarse pants leg.

"Some loose talk. He was in the Bon Ton buyin' grub an' such. Johnny said somethin' at which he took offense an' they had some words. Johnny was wearin' a gun, but this Lock wasn't, so he gets him a gun an' goes over to the Longhorn.

"He pushes open the door an' shoots Johnny twice through the body. In the back." Hardin spat. "He fired a third shot but that missed Johnny and busted a bottle of whisky."

There was a moment's silence while they digested this, and then Neill looked up.

"We lynchin' him for the killin' or bustin' the whisky?"

It was a good question, but drew no reply. The dignity of the five other riders was not to be touched by humor. They were riders on a mission. Neill let his eyes drift over the dusty copper of the desert. He had no liking for the idea of lynching any man, and he did not know the squatter from the Sorenson place. Living there should be punishment enough for any man. Besides—

"Who saw the shooting?" he asked.

"Nobody seen it, actually. Only he never gave Johnny a fair shake. Sam was behind the bar, but he was down to the other end and it happened too fast."

"What's his name? Somebody call him Lock?" Neill asked. There was something incongruous in lynching a man whose name you did not know. He shifted in the saddle, squinting his eyes toward the distant lakes dancing in the mirage of heat waves.

"What's it matter? Lock, his name is. Chat Lock."

"Funny name."

The comment drew no response. The dust was thicker now and Neill pulled

his bandanna over his nose and mouth. His eyes were drawn back to the distant blue of the lakes. They were enticingly cool and beautiful, lying across the way ahead and in the basin off to the right. This was the mirage that lured many a man from his trail to pursue the always retreating shoreline of the lake. It looked like water, it really did.

Maybe there was water in the heat waves. Maybe if a man knew how he could extract it and drink. The thought drew his hand to his canteen, but he took it away without drinking. The slosh water in the canteen was no longer enticing, for it was warm, brackish, and unsatisfying.

"You know him, Kimmel?" Kesney asked. He was a wiry little man, hard as a whipstock, with bits of sharp steel for eyes and brown musclecorded hands. "I wouldn't know him if I saw him."

"Sure, I know him. Big feller, strong made, rusty-like hair an' maybe forty year old. Looks plumb salty, too, an' from what I hear he's no friendly sort of man. Squattin' on that Sorenson place looks plumb suspicious, for no man can make him a livin' on that dry-as-a-bone place. No fit place for man nor beast. Ever'body figures no honest man would squat on such a place."

It seemed a strange thing, to be searching out a man whom none of them knew. Of course, they had all known Johnny Webb. He was a handsome, popular young man, a daredevil and a hellion, but a very attractive one, and a top hand to boot. They had all known him and had all liked him. Then, one of the things that made them so sure that this had been a wrong killing, even aside from the shots in the back, was the fact that Johnny Webb had been the fastest man in the Spring Valley country. Fast, and a dead shot.

Johnny had worked with all these men, and they were good men, hard men, but good. Kimmel, Hardin and Kesney had all made something of their ranches, as had the others, only somewhat less so. They had come West when the going was rough, fought Indians and rustlers, then battled drought, dust and hot, hard winds. It took a strong man to survive in this country, and they had survived. He, Neill, was the youngest of them all, and the newest in the country. He was still looked upon with some reserve. He had been here only five years.

Neill could see the tracks of the buckskin and it gave him a strange feeling to realize that the man who rode that horse would soon be dead, hanging from a noose in one of those ropes attached to a saddle horn of Hardin or Kimmel. Neill had never killed a man, nor seen one killed by another man, and the thought made him uncomfortable.

Yet Johnny was gone, and his laughter and his jokes were a thing passed. They had brightened more than one roundup, more than one bitter day of heart-breaking labor on the range. Not that he had been an angel. He had been a proper hand with a gun, and could throw one. And in his time he had had his troubles.

"He's walkin' his horse," Kesney said, "leadin' him."

"He's a heavy man," Hardin agreed, "an' he figures to give us a long chase."

"Gone lame on him maybe," Kimmel suggested.

"No, that horse isn't limpin'. This Lock is a smart one."

They had walked out of the ankle-deep dust now and were crossing a parched, dry plain of crusted earth. Hardin reined in suddenly and pointed.

"Look there." He indicated a couple of flecks on the face of the earth crust where something had spilled. "Water splashed."

"Careless," Neill said. "He'll need that water."

"No," Kesney said. "He was pourin' water in a cloth to wipe out his horse's nostrils. Bet you a dollar."

"Sure," Hardin agreed, "that's it. Horse breathes a lot better. A man runnin' could kill a good horse on this Flat. He knows that."

THEY rode on, and for almost a half hour, no one spoke. Neill frowned at the sun. It had been on his left a few minutes ago, and now they rode

straight into it.

"What's he doin'?" Kesney said wonderingly. "This ain't the way to his place!" The trail had turned again, and now the sun was on their right. Then it turned again, and was at their backs. Hardin was in the lead and he drew up and swore wickedly.

They ranged alongside him, and stared down into a draw that cracked the face of the desert alongside the trail they had followed. Below them was a place where a horse had stood, and across the bank something white fluttered from the parched clump of greasewood.

Kesney slid from the saddle and crossed the wash. When he had the slip of white, he stared at it, and then they heard him swear. He walked back and handed it to Hardin. They crowded near.

Neill took the slip from Hardin's fingers after he had read it. It was torn from some sort of book and the words were plain enough, scrawled with a flat rock for a rest.

> That was a fair shutin anyways six aint nowhars enuf, go fetch more men. Man on the gray better titen his girth or heel have him a sorebacked hoss.

"Why, that . . .!" Short swore softly. "He was lyin' within fifty yards of us when he come by. Had him a rifle, too, I seen it in a saddle scabbard on that buckskin in town. He could have got one of us, anyway!".

"Two or three most likely." Kimmel commented. The men stared at the paper, then looked back into the wash. The sand showed a trail, but cattle had walked here, too. It would make the going a little slower.

Neill, his face flushed and his ears red, was tightening his saddle girth. The others avoided his eyes. The insult to him, even if the advice was good, was an insult to them all. Their jaws tightened. The squatter was playing Indian with them, and none of them liked it.

"Fair shootin', yeah!" Sutter exploded. "Right in the back!"

The trail led down the wash now, and it was slower going. The occasional puffs of wind they had left on the desert above were gone and the heat in the bottom of the wash was ovenlike. They rode into it, almost seeming to push their way through flames that seared. Sweat dripped into their eyes until they smarted, and trickled in tiny rivulets through their dust-caked beards, making their faces itch maddeningly.

The wash spilled out into a wide, flat bed of sand left by the rains of bygone years, and the tracks were plainer now. Neill tightened his bandanna and rode on, sodden with heat and weariness. The trail seemed deliberately to lead them into the worst regions, for now he was riding straight toward an alkali lake that loomed ahead.

At the edge of the water, the trail vanished. Lock had ridden right into the lake. They drew up and stared at it, unbelieving.

"He can't cross," Hardin stated flatly. "That's deep out to the middle. Durned treacherous, too. A horse could get bogged down mighty easy."

They skirted the lake, taking it carefully, three going one way, and three the other. Finally, glancing back, Neill caught sight of Kesney's uplifted arm.

"They found it," he said, "let's go back." Yet as he rode he was thinking what they all knew. This was a delay, for Lock knew they would have to scout the shores both ways to find his trail, and there would be a delay while the last three rejoined the first. A small thing, but in such a chase it was important.

"Why not ride right on to the ranch?" Short suggested.

"We might," Hardin speculated. "On the other hand he might fool us an' never go nigh it. Then we could lose him."

The trail became easier, for now Lock was heading straight into the mountains.

"Where's he goin'?" Kesney demanded irritably. "This don't make sense, nohow!"

There was no reply, the horsemen stretching out in single file, riding up the draw into the mountains. Suddenly Kimmel, who was now in the lead, drew

up. Before him a thread of water trickled from the rock and spilled into a basin of stones.

"Huh!" Hardin stared. "I never knowed about this spring afore. Might's well have a drink." He swung down.

They all got down and Neill rolled a smoke.

"Somebody sure fixed her up nice," he said. "That wall of stone makin' that basin ain't so old."

"No, it ain't."

Short watched them drink and grinned.

"He's a fox, right enough. He's an old *ladino*, this one. A reg'lar mossy horn. It don't take no time for one man to drink, an' one hoss. But here we got six men an' six horses to drink an' we lose more time."

"You think he really planned it that way?" Neill was skeptical.

Hardin looked around at him. "Sure. This Lock knows his way around."

When they were riding on, Neill thought about that. Lock *was* shrewd. He was desert wise. And he was leading them a chase. If not even Hardin knew of this spring, and he had been twenty years in the Spring Valley country, then Lock must know a good deal about the country. Of course, this range of mountains was singularly desolate, and there was nothing in them to draw a man.

SO THEY knew this about their quarry. He was a man wise in the ways of desert and trail, and one who knew the country. Also, Neill reflected, it was probable he had built that basin himself. Nobody lived over this way but Lock, for now it was not far to the Sorenson place.

Now they climbed a single horse trail across the starkly eroded foothills, sprinkled with clumps of Joshua and Spanish bayonet. It was a weird and broken land, where long fingers of black lava stretched down the hills and out into the desert as though clawing toward the alkali lake they had left behind. The trail mounted steadily and a little breeze touched their cheeks. Neill lifted his hand and wiped dust from his brow and it came away in flakes, plastered by sweat.

The trail doubled and changed, now across the rock face of the burnt red sandstone, then into the lava itself, skirting hills where the exposed ledges mounted in layers like a vast cake of many colors. Then the way dipped down, and they wound among huge boulders, smooth as so many water worn pebbles. Neill sagged in the saddle, for the hours were growing long, and the trail showed no sign of ending.

"Lucky he ain't waitin' to shoot," Kimmel commented, voicing the first remark in over an hour. "He could pick us off like flies."

As if in reply to his comment, there was an angry whine above them, and then the crack of a rifle.

As one man they scattered for shelter, whipping rifles from their scabbards, for all but two had replaced them when they reached the lake. Hardin swore, and Kimmel wormed his way to a better view of the country ahead.

Short had left the saddle in his scramble for shelter, and his horse stood in the open, the canteen making a large lump behind the saddle. Suddenly the horse leaped to solid thud of a striking bullet, and then followed the crack of the rifle, echoing over the mountainside.

Short swore viciously. "If he killed that horse . . .!" But the horse, while shifting nervously, seemed uninjured.

"Hey!" Kesney yelled. "He shot your canteen!"

It was true enough. Water was pouring onto the ground, and swearing, Short started to get up. Sutter grabbed his arm.

"Hold it! If he could get that canteen, he could get you!"

They waited, and the trickle of water slowed, then faded to a drip. All of them stared angrily at the unrewarding rocks ahead of them. One canteen the less. Still they had all filled up at the spring and should have enough. Uncomfortably, however, they realized that the object of their chase, the man called Chat Lock, knew where he was taking them, and he had not emptied

that canteen by chance. Now they understood the nature of the man they followed. He did nothing without object.

Lying on the sand or rocks they waited, peering ahead.

"He's probably ridin' off now!" Sutter barked.

Nobody showed any disposition to move. The idea appealed to none of them, for the shot into the canteen showed plainly enough the man they followed was no child with a rifle. Kimmel finally put his hat on a rifle muzzle and lifted it. There was no response. Then he tried sticking it around a corner.

Nothing happened, and he withdrew it. Almost at once, a shot hit the trail not far from where the hat had been. The indication was plain. Lock was warning them not only that he was still there, but that he was not to be fooled by so obvious a trick.

They waited, and Hardin suddenly slid over a rock and began a flanking movement. He crawled, and they waited, watching his progress. The cover he had was good, and he could crawl almost to where the hidden marksman must be. Finally, he disappeared from their sight and they waited. Neill tasted the water in his canteen, and dozed.

At last they heard a long yell, and looking up, they saw Hardin standing on a rock far up the trail, waving them on. Mounting, they led Hardin's horse and rode on up the trail. He met them at the trail side, and his eyes were angry.

"Gone!" he said, thrusting out a hard palm. In it lay three brass cartridge shells. "Found 'em standing up in a line on a rock. An' look here." He pointed, and they stared down at the trail where he indicated. A neat arrow made of stones pointed down the trail ahead of them, and scratched on the face of the sand stone above it were the words: FOLLER THE SIGNS.

Kesney jerked his hat from his head and hurled it to the ground.

"Why, that dirty . . . !" He stopped, beside himself with anger. The contempt of the man they pursued was obvious. He was making fools of them, deliberately teasing them, indicating his trail as to a child or a tenderfoot.

"That ratty back-shootin' killer!" Short said. "I'll take pleasure in usin' a rope on him! Thinks he's smart!"

They started on, and the horse ahead of them left a plain trail, but a quarter of a mile further along, three dried pieces of mesquite had been laid in the trail to form another arrow.

Neill stared at it. This was becoming a personal matter now. He was deliberately playing with them, and he must know how that would set with men such as Kimmel and Hardin. It was a deliberate challenge, more, it was a sign of the utmost contempt.

The vast emptiness of the basin they skirted now was becoming lost in the misty purple light of late afternoon. On the right, the wall of the mountain grew steeper and turned a deeper red. The burnt red of the earlier hours was now a bright rust red, and here and there long fingers of quartz shot their white arrows down into the face of the cliff.

THEY all saw the next message, but all read and averted their eyes. It was written on a blank face of the cliff. First, there was an arrow, pointing ahead, and then the words, SHADE, SO'S YOU DON'T GIT SUNSTROK.

They rode on, and for several miles as the shadows drew down, they followed the markers their quarry left at intervals along the trail. All six of the men were tired and beaten. Their horses moved slowly, and the desert air was growing chill. It had been a long chase.

Suddenly, Kimmel and Kesney, who rode side by side, reined in. A small wall or rock was across the trail, and an arrow pointed downward into a deep cleft.

"What do you think, Hardin? He could pick us off man by man."

Hardin studied the situation with misgivings, and hesitated, lighting a smoke.

"He ain't done it yet."

Neill's remark fell into the still air like a rock into a calm pool of water. As the rings of ripples spread wider

into the thoughts of the other five, he waited.

Lock could have killed one or two of them, perhaps all of them by now. Why had he not? Was he waiting for darkness and an easy getaway? Or was he leading them into a trap?

"The devil with it!" Hardin exclaimed impatiently. He wheeled his horse and pistol in hand, started down into the narrow rift in the dark. One by one, they followed. The darkness closed around them, and the air was damp and chill. They rode on, and then the trail mounted steeply toward a grayness ahead of them, and they came out in a small basin. Ahead of them they heard a trickle of running water and saw the darkness of trees.

Cautiously they approached. Suddenly, they saw the light of a fire. Hardin drew up sharply and slid from his horse. The others followed. In a widening circle, they crept toward the fire. Kesney was the first to reach it, and the sound of his swearing rent the stillness and shattered it like thin glass. They swarmed in around him.

The fire was built close beside a small running stream, and nearby was a neat pile of dry sticks. On a paper, laid out carefully on a rock, was a small mound of coffee, and another of sugar. Nobody said anything for a minute, staring at the fire and the coffee. The taunt was obvious, and they were bitter men. It was bad enough to have a stranger make such fools of them on a trail, to treat them like tenderfeet, but to prepare a camp for them. . . .

"I'll be cussed if I will!" Short said violently. "I'll go sleep on the desert first!"

"Well—" Hardin was philosophical. "Might's well make the most of it. We can't trail him at night, no way."

Kimmel had dug a coffee pot out of his pack and was getting water from the stream which flowed from a basin just above their camp. Several of the others began to dig out grub, and Kesney sat down glumly, staring into the fire. He started to pick a stick off the pile left for them, then jerked his hand as though he had seen a snake and getting up, he stalked back into the trees, and after a minute, he returned.

Sutter was looking around, and suddenly he spoke. "Boys, I know this place! Only I never knew about that crack in the wall. This here's the Mormon Well!"

Hardin sat up and looked around. "Durned if it ain't," he said. "I ain't been in here for six or seven years."

Sutter squatted on his haunches. "Look!" He was excited and eager. "Here's Mormon Well, where we are. Right over here to the northwest there's an old saw mill an' a tank just above it. I'll bet a side of beef that durned killer is holed up for the night in that sawmill!"

Kesney, who had taken most to heart the taunting of the man they pursued, was on his knees staring at the diagram drawn in the damp sand. He was nodding thoughtfully.

"He's right! He sure is. I remember that old mill! I holed up there one time in a bad storm. Spent two days in it. If that sidewinder stays there tonight, we can get him!"

As they ate, they talked over their plan. Travelling over the rugged mountains ahead of them was almost impossible in the darkness, and besides, even if Lock could go the night without stopping, his horse could not. The buckskin must have rest. Moreover, with all the time Lock had been losing along the trail, he could not be far ahead. It stood to reason that he must have planned just this, for them to stop here, and to hole up in the sawmill himself.

"We'd better surprise him," Hardin suggested. "That sawmill is heavy timber an' a man in there with a rifle an' plenty of ammunition could stand us off for a week."

"Has he got plenty?"

"Sure he has," Neill told them. "I was in the Bon Ton when he bought his stuff. He's got grub and he's got plenty of .44's. They do for either his Colt or his Winchester."

Unspoken as yet, but present in the mind of each man, was a growing respect for their quarry, a respect and an element of doubt. Would such a man as

this shoot another in the back? The evidence against him was plain enough, or seemed plain enough.

YET beyond the respect there was something else, for it was no longer simply a matter of justice to be done, but a personal thing. Each of them felt in some measure that his reputation was at stake. It had not been enough for Lock to leave an obvious trail, but he must leave markers, the sort to be used for any tenderfoot. There were men in this group who could trail a woodtick through a pine forest.

"Well," Kimmel said reluctantly, and somewhat grimly, "he left us good coffee, anyway!"

They tried the coffee, and agreed. Few things in this world are so comforting and so warming to the heart as hot coffee on a chilly night over a campfire when the day has been long and weary. They drank, and they relaxed. And as they relaxed the seeds of doubt began to sprout and put forth branches of speculation.

"He could have got more'n one of us today," Sutter hazarded. "This one is brush wise."

"I'll pull that rope on him!" Short stated positively. "No man makes a fool out of me!" But in his voice there was something lacking.

"You know," Kesney suggested, "if he knows these hills like he seems to, an' if he really wanted to lose us, we'd have to burn the stump and sift the ashes before we found him!"

There was no reply. Hardin drew back and eased the leg of his pants away from the skin, for the cloth had grown too hot for comfort.

Short tossed a stick from the neat pile into the fire.

"That mill ain't so far away," he suggested, "shall we give her a try?"

"Later." Hardin leaned back against a log and yawned. "She's been a hard day."

"Both them bullets go in Johnny's back?"

The question moved among them like a ghost. Short stirred uneasily, and Kesney looked up and glared around. "Sure they did! Didn't they, Hardin?"

"Sure." He paused thoughtfully. "Well, no. One of them was under his left arm. Right between the ribs. Looked like a heart shot to me. The other one went through near his spine."

"The heck with it!" Kesney declared. "No slick, rustlin' squatter can come into this country and shoot one of our boys! He was shot in the back, an' I seen both holes. Johnny got that one nigh the spine, an' he must have turned and tried to draw, then got that bullet through the heart!"

Nobody had seen it. Neill remembered that, and the thought rankled. Were they doing an injustice? He felt like a traitor at the thought, but secretly he had acquired a strong tinge of respect for the man they followed.

The fire flickered and the shadows danced a slow, rhythmic quadrille against the dark background of trees. He peeled bark from the log beside him and fed it into the fire. It caught, sparked brightly, and popped once or twice. Hardin leaned over and pushed the coffee pot nearer the coals. Kesney checked the loads in his Winchester.

"How far to that saw mill, Hardin?"

"About six miles, the way we go."

"Let's get started." Short got to his feet and brushed off the sand. "I want to get home. Got my boys buildin' fence. You either keep a close watch or they are off gal hootin' over the hills."

They tightened their saddle girths, doused the fire, and mounted up. With Hardin in the lead once more, they moved off into the darkness.

Neill brought up the rear. It was damp and chill among the cliffs, and felt like the inside of a cavern. Overhead the stars were very bright. Mary was going to be worried, for he was never home so late. Nor did he like leaving her alone. He wanted to be home, eating a warm supper and going to bed in the old four poster with the patchwork quilt Mary's grandmother made, pulled over him. What enthusiasm he had had for the chase was gone. The warm fire, the coffee, his own weariness, and the growing respect for Lock had changed him.

Now they all knew he was not the manner of man they had supposed. Justice can be a harsh taskmaster, but Western men know their kind, and the lines were strongly drawn. When you have slept beside a man on the trail, worked with him, and with others like him, you come to know your kind. In the trail of the man Chat Lock, each rider of the posse was seeing the sort of man he knew, the sort he could respect. The thought was nagging and unsubstantial, but each of them felt a growing doubt, even Short and Kesney who were most obdurate and resentful.

They knew how a backshooter lived and worked. He had his brand on everything he did. The mark of this man was the mark of a man who did things, who stood upon his own two feet, and who if he died, died facing his enemy. To the unknowing, such conclusions might seem doubtful, but the men of the desert knew their kind.

The mill was dark and silent, a great looming bulk beside the stream and the still pool of the mill pond. They dismounted and eased close. Then according to a prearranged plan, they scattered and surrounded it. From behind a lodgepole pine, Hardin called out.

"We're comin' in, Lock! We want you!"

THE challenge was harsh and ringing. Now that the moment had come something of the old suspense returned. They listened to the water babbling as it trickled over the old dam, and then they moved. At their first step, they heard Lock's voice.

"Don't come in here, boys! I don't want to kill none of you, but you come an' I will! That was a fair shootin'! You've got no call to come after me!"

Hardin hesitated, chewing his mustache. "You shot him in the back!" he yelled.

"No such thing! He was a-facin' the bar when I come in. He seen I was heeled, an' he drawed as he turned. I beat him to it. My first shot took him in the side an' he was knocked back against the bar. My second hit him in the back an' the third missed as he was a fallin'. You hombres didn't see that right."

The sound of his voice trailed off and the water chuckled over the stones, then sighed to a murmur among the trees. The logic of Lock's statement struck them all. It *could* have been that way.

A long moment passed, and then Hardin spoke up again.

"You come in an' we'll give you a trial. Fair an' square!"

"How?" Lock's voice was a challenge. "You ain't got no witness. Neither have I. Ain't nobody to say what happened there but me, as Johnny ain't alive."

"Johnny was a mighty good man, an' he was our friend!" Short shouted. "No murderin' squatter is goin' to move into this country an' start shootin' folks up!"

There was no reply to that, and they waited, hesitating a little. Neill leaned disconsolately against the tree where he stood. After all, Lock might be telling the truth. How did they know? There was no use hanging a man unless you were sure.

"Gab!" Short's comment was explosive. "Let's move in, Hardin! Let's get him! He's lyin'! Nobody could beat Johnny, we know that!"

"Webb was a good man in his own country!" Lock shouted in reply. The momentary silence that followed held them, and then, almost as a man they began moving in. Neill did not know exactly when or why he started. Inside he felt sick and empty. He was fed up on the whole business and every instinct he had told him this man was no backshooter.

Carefully, they moved, for they knew this man was handy with a gun. Suddenly, Hardin's voice rang out.

"Hold it, men! Stay where you are until daybreak! Keep your eyes open an' your ears. If he gets out of here he'll be lucky, an' in the daylight we can get him, or fire the mill!"

Neill sank to a sitting position behind a log. Relief was a great warmth that swept over him. There wouldn't be any killing tonight. Not tonight, at least.

Yet as the hours passed, his ears grew more and more attuned to the darkness. A rabbit rustled, a pine cone dropped from a tree, the wind stirred high in the pine tops and the few stars winked through, lonesomely peering down upon the silent men.

With daylight they moved in and they went through the doors and up to the windows of the old mill, and it was empty and still. They stared at each other, and Short swore viciously, the sound booming in the echoing, empty room.

"Let's go down to the Sorenson place," Kimmel said. "He'll be there."

And somehow they were all very sure he would be. They knew he would be because they knew him for their kind of man. He would retreat no further than his own ranch, his own hearth. There, if they were to have him and hang him, they would have to burn him out, and men would die in the process. Yet with these men there was no fear. They felt the drive of duty, the need for maintaining some law in this lonely desert and mountain land. There was only doubt which had grown until each man was shaken with it. Even Short, whom the markers by the trail had angered, and Kesney, who was the best tracker among them, even better than Hardin, had been irritated by it, too.

The sun was up and warming them when they rode over the brow of the hill and looked down into the parched basin where the Sorenson place lay.

But it was no parched basin. Hardin drew up so suddenly his startled horse almost reared. It was no longer the Sorenson place.

The house had been patched and rebuilt. The roof had spots of new lumber upon it, and the old pole barn had been made water tight and strong. A new corral had been built, and to the right of the house was a fenced in garden of vegetables, green and pretty after the desert of the day before.

Thoughtfully, and in a tight cavalcade, they rode down the hill. The stock they saw was fat and healthy, and the corral was filled with horses.

"Been a lot of work done here," Kimmel said. And he knew how much work it took to make such a place attractive.

"Don't look like no killer's place!" Neill burst out. Then he flushed and drew back, embarrassed by his statement. He was the youngest of these men, and the newest in the country.

No response was forthcoming. He had but stated what they all believed. There was something stable, lasting, something real and genuine in this place.

"I been waitin' for you."

THE remark from behind them stiffened every spine. Chat Lock was here, behind them. And he would have a gun on them, and if one of them moved, he could die.

"My wife's down there fixin' breakfast. I told her I had some friends comin' in. A posse huntin' a killer. I've told her nothin' about this trouble. You ride down there now, you keep your guns. You eat your breakfast and then if you feel bound and determined to get somebody for a fair shootin', I'll come out with anyone of you or all of you, but I ain't goin' to hang.

"I ain't namin' no one man because I don't want to force no fight on anybody. You ride down there now."

They rode, and in the dooryard, they dismounted. Neill turned then, and for the first time he saw Chat Lock.

He was a big man, compact and strong. His rusty brown hair topped a brown, sun-hardened face but with the warmth in his eyes it was a friendly sort of face. Not at all what he expected.

Hardin looked at him. "You made some changes here."

"I reckon." Lock gestured toward the well. "Dug by hand. My wife worked the windlass." He looked around at them, taking them in with one sweep of his eyes. "I've got the grandest woman in the world."

Neill felt hot tears in his eyes suddenly, and busied himself loosening his saddle girth to keep the others from seeing. That was the way he felt about Mary.

The door opened suddenly, and they

turned. The sight of a woman in this desert country was enough to make any man turn. What they saw was not what they expected. She was young, perhaps in her middle twenties, and she was pretty, with brown wavy hair and gray eyes and a few freckles on her nose. "Won't you come in? Chat told me he had some friends coming for breakfast, and it isn't often we have anybody in."

Heavy footed and shamefaced they walked up on the porch. Kesney saw the care and neatness with which the hard hewn planks had been fitted. Here, too, was the same evidence of lasting, of permanence, of strength. This was the sort of men a country needed. He thought the thought before he fixed his attention on it, and then he flushed.

Inside, the room was as neat as the girl herself. How did she get the floors so clean? Before he thought, he phrased the question. She smiled.

"Oh, that was Chat's idea! He made a frame and fastened a piece of pumice stone to a stick. It cuts into all the cracks and keeps them very clean."

The food smelled good, and when Hardin looked at his hands, Chat motioned to the door.

"There's water an' towels if you want to wash up."

Neill rolled up his sleeves and dipped his hands in the basin. The water was soft, and that was rare in this country, and the soap felt good on his hands. When he had dried his hands, he walked in. Hardin and Kesney had already seated themselves and Lock's wife was pouring coffee.

"Men," Lock said, "this is Mary. You'll have to tell her your names. I reckon I missed them."

Mary. Neill looked up. She was Mary, too. He looked down at his plate again and ate a few bites. When he looked up, she was smiling at him.

"My wife's name is Mary," he said, "she's a fine girl!"

"She would be! But why don't you bring her over? I haven't talked with a woman in so long I wouldn't know how it seemed! Chat, why haven't you invited them over?"

Chat mumbled something, and Neill stared at his coffee. The men ate in uncomfortable silence. Hardin's eyes kept shifting around the room. That pumice stone. He'd have to fix up a deal like that for Jane. She was always fussing about the work of keeping a board floor clean. That wash stand inside, too, with pipes made of hollow logs to carry the water out so she wouldn't have to be running back and forth. That was an idea, too.

They finished their meal reluctantly. One by one they trooped outside, avoiding each other's eyes. Chat Lock did not keep them waiting. He walked down among them.

"If there's to be shootin'," he said quietly, "let's get away from the house."

Hardin looked up. "Lock, was that right, what you said in the mill, Was it a fair shootin'?"

Lock nodded. "It was. Johnny Webb prodded me. I didn't want trouble, nor did I want to hide behind the fact I wasn't packin' an iron. I walked over to the saloon not aimin' for trouble. I aimed to give him a chance if he wanted it. He drawed an' I beat him. It was a fair shootin'."

"All right." Hardin nodded. "That's good enough for me. I reckon you're a different sort of man than any of us figured."

"Let's mount up," Short said, "I got fence to build."

Chat Lock put his hand on Hardin's saddle. "You folks come over some time. She gets right lonesome. I don't mind it so much, but you know how women folks are."

"Sure," Hardin said, "sure thing."

"An' you bring your Mary over," he told Neill.

Neill nodded, his throat full. As they mounted the hill, he glanced back. Mary Lock was standing in the door way, waving to them, and the sunlight was very bright in the clean swept door yard.

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Next Issue: THE FUR TRAPPERS, a Frontier Novelet by TOM W. BLACKBURN

SKEETER

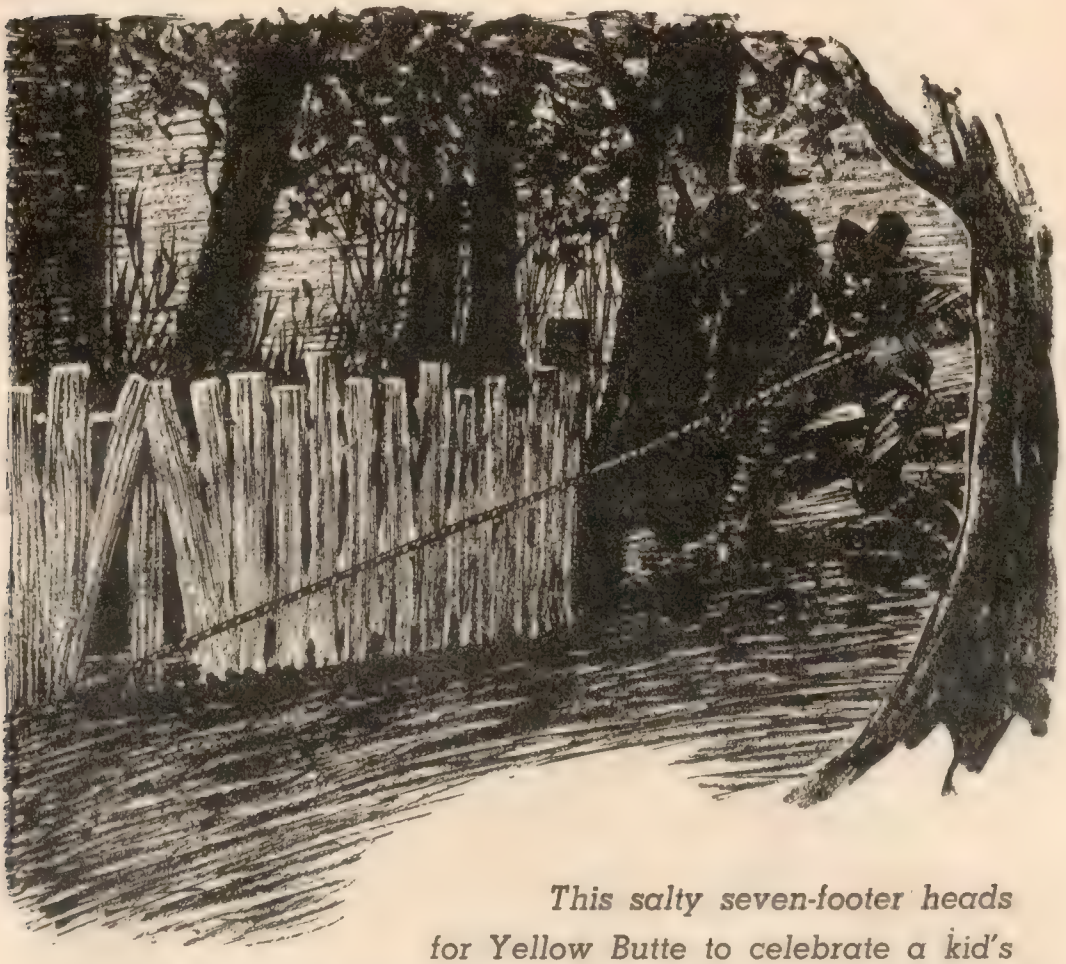
A NOVELET BY

W. C. TUTTLE

I

WILLIAM HARRISON SARG, known as "Skeeter Bill," leaned against the bar of the only saloon in Temple Rock, and considered the fly-specked back-bar. Skeeter was at least seven feet tall, in his high-heels and sombrero. He had wide shoulders, which tapered sharply to a wasp-like waist and a long pair of skinny legs, encased in tight-fitting, faded overalls. He wore a colorless shirt, a wispy, red handkerchief

BILL COMES TO TOWN



This salty seven-footer heads for Yellow Butte to celebrate a kid's birthday—and does some plumb fast shooting on the way!

around his long neck, the ends held tight with a blue poker-chip. Around his thin waist was a home-made, form-fitting gun-belt, and his holstered Colt .45 hung low along his thigh.

Skeeter Bill was not handsome. His face was long, thin, with high cheek bones, and a gash-like mouth, and eyes that were just a little green tinted. He was not handsome, but he looked efficient. A fat bartender, one damp lock of hair plastered down over one eyebrow, looked questioningly at the tall cowpoke. Skeeter shook his head.

"If it was ice-cold I'd take more," he said quietly, "but I jist cain't go more'n three bottles of luke-warm pop."

"Yuh're the only pop-drinker I've met," said the bartender. "Yuh won't never git happy on that stuff."

"No," agreed Skeeter," nor unhappy, either, my friend. How are things these

days in Road-Runner Valley?"

"Oh, all right," replied the bartender. "You've been there?"

"Not for a couple of years. Been down in the Panhandle, where I didn't hear much news of this country. You been down there lately?"

"Couple months ago. I worked there for a year, tendin' bar in the Seven-Up at Yellow Butte."

"Yea-ah? I used to know Buck Hadley. He still own it?"

"Not now. It belongs to Slim Lacey."

"Slim Lacey?" Skeeter stared at the bartender. "Yuh say that Slim Lacey owns the Seven-Up?"

"Well, he did a month ago, I know."

Skeeter shoved his hat back and scratched his forehead. He seemed a little astonished.

He said: "Well, mebbe it's all right. You'd prob'ly know Hooty Edwards."

"No, I didn't, but I've heard of him. He left there before I went to Yellow Butte."

Skeeter cuffed his hat sideways on his head, leaned his elbows on the bar and scowled at the fat bartender.

"You mean that Hooty Edwards ain't down there no more?" he asked incredulously.

The bartender shook his head. "Didn't you know about him?"

"Know what about him?" asked Skeeter quickly.

"That he went to the pen for twenty years."

SKEETER'S head and shoulders sagged momentarily, and he blinked in amazement.

"You ain't jokin'—I hope you are, Mister," he said huskily.

"I wouldn't joke on a thing like that. He's been gone quite a while, they told me. He wrecked the bank in Yellow Butte. Never did have another one."

"I'm a sea-serpent's sister!" whispered Skeeter. "Tell me what yuh know about it, will yuh?"

The bartender told him that "Hooty" Edwards had forced the banker and his wife from their home to the bank. There he had compelled the banker to open the vault. Then he tied them both up and took his own time in looting the vault. It was close to morning, and the sheriff, coming from an all-night poker game, looked into the bank window and saw moonlight shining through the open doorway at the rear of the room.

He ran around to the rear of the building, just as the robber was riding away. They exchanged shots, and the sheriff said he scored a hit, but the man got away.

Later in the day they found Hooty Edwards sprawled beside a trail near his own ranchhouse, his white horse tangled up in the brush near him. The bandit had ridden a white horse. Edwards still had the black mask around his neck. The doctor said he had been shot and would have eventually bled to death, if they hadn't found him.

Skeeter listened to the whole tale, his face a mask of his feelings.

"Yuh see," remarked the bartender, "he wasn't able to prove no alibi. His wife said he left home after supper, comin' to Yellow Butte. Hooty said he didn't know what happened. He had a few drinks in Yellow Butte, but everythin' is a blank atfer that, except that he remembers gettin' on his horse. They gave him twenty years—but they didn't get the money back. They say he cached it, but he swore he didn't remember what he done."

"He was married," said Skeeter slowly, "and had two kids."

"Yeah, I've seen 'em; a boy and a girl."

"The boy," said Skeeter huskily, "is named William S. Edwards. They named him after me, Bill Sarg. He'll be twelve years of age in a few days, and I was aimin' to help him celebrate his birthday. Came all the way from Texas to do that. Yuh see, he's the only kid that ever was named after me."

"That's hard luck, Sarg. So you're Skeeter Bill Sarg. I've heard of you. They say you can drop a dollar with yore right hand from yore hip, draw yore gun and hit the dollar before it hits the ground."

"I have," nodded Skeeter soberly, "and I'm also shy the little toe on my right foot. They used to say that I had

more brains in my right hand than I have in my head, too. Mebbe it's 'cause I use it more. I wonder what Mrs. Edwards is doin' to support her family."

"Worked in a restaurant, when I was there, slingin' hash. She's a pretty woman, I'll say that."

"She's awful nice, too," said Skeeter. "I wouldn't like to hear anybody say she ain't. And that kid was named after me, too. Well, I reckon I'll be movin' on. See yuh later."

"Are you goin' down to see the kid, Sarg?"

Skeeter nodded. "After all," he replied, "no matter what happened, he'll have his twelfth birthday in a few days."

"Tell him hello for me," said the bartender. "Jist say that Fatty, the bartender, said Happy Birthday."

"We both appreciate that," said Skeeter, smiling faintly. "I'll tell him."

A pall of dust hung over the town of Yellow Butte as Skeeter Bill rode in. They were loading cattle at the big corrals down at the railroad tracks. Yellow Butte was the shipping point for all of Road-Runner Valley. There was nothing beautiful about Yellow Butte, with its crooked, narrow streets, sand-blasted signs and false-fronted buildings.

LAZILY Skeeter Bill dismounted and tied his horse at a hitchrack which was mercifully in the shade of the Seven-Up Saloon. On the other side of the street Skeeter could see the faded and scarred gold lettering on a large window, BANK OF YELLOW BUTTE. It was used now as a store-room for the general merchandise store.

Skeeter Bill was familiar with all of Yellow Butte, even those places of business whose signs had long since faded out. He went into the Seven-Up Saloon. It was quite a large establishment, with gambling layouts along one side, and a long bar on the other. It smelled of stale beer and spilled liquor, but it was cool in there.

Several men were at the long bar, and Skeeter recognized them at a glance—Sam Keenan, owner of the Tumbling K, Al Creedon, the big sheriff, Muddy Poole, his deputy and Slim Lacey who, the bartender at Temple Rock had said, was the new owner of the Seven-Up Saloon.

Muddy Poole was the first to recognize Skeeter Bill in the subdued light of the room, and he emitted a yip of delight.

"If it ain't Old Skeet!" he exclaimed. "Welcome back among us!"

"Hyah, Muddy," grinned Skeeter Bill. "Gents, howdy."

They all shook hands with Skeeter, but not all were as enthusiastic as Muddy Poole, who said:

"Where on earth did you drop from, Skeet?"

"Oh, I just drifted in, Muddy. Thought I'd see what the old place looked like again. How's everybody?"

"Finer'n frawg-hair—mostly."

Skeeter looked curiously at Slim Lacey. When Skeeter Bill left Yellow Butte, Slim Lacey was a down-at-the-heel swamper in a little saloon at the other end of town, and without a decent shirt to his back, but now he was wearing white silk shirts, broadcloth pants and patent-leather shoes. Slim's smile was always sickly, and it hadn't changed much.

Skeeter Bill said, "How yuh comin', Slim?"

"Fine, Skeet. Yuh're lookin' good. Glad to see yuh back. Have a drink?"

"You never knowed Skeet to take a drink," reminded Muddy.

"Thank yuh," smiled Skeeter Bill. "You've got a memory, Muddy."

"It ain't hard to remember them what don't drink, Skeet."

"Well, I've got to go back to the corral," said Keenan, placing his glass on the bar. "We're shippin' today, Skeet."

"Yeah, I saw the dust in the air, Sam. How's the market?"

"Just fair. It's always down, when I've got stuff to ship."

Muddy Poole walked outside with Skeeter Bill. Muddy knew of the friendship between Skeeter Bill and Hooty Edwards.

"Do yuh know about Hooty?" asked the deputy quietly.

Skeeter Bill nodded. "I saw Fatty, the bartender, in Temple Rock, and he told me about Hooty. First I'd heard, Muddy. It shore hurt to hear a thing like that, don'tcha know it?"

"Hurt me, too," said Muddy. "Hooty was fine. Margie is workin' down in the New York Chop House, doin' her best to keep the kids goin'. We've tried to help her, Skeet, but she's proud."

"Yeah, I bet she is. Whatever became of the Circle E, after they sent Hooty away?"

"Well, the law took it over for the bank. Yuh see, the bank was busted flat, and so was most folks around here. Yuh never can sell a thing like that for what it's worth. In fact, nobody was in shape to buy it, but Sam Keenan finally bought it for about two-bits on the dollar."

Skeeter Bill nodded slowly. "I can understand that, Muddy. But how come Slim Lacey owns the Seven-Up? When I left here he didn't have a cent."

"Well, it does sound kind of funny, but it jist goes to prove that yuh never can tell which way a dill-pickle will squirt. Buck Hadley wanted to sell out and go back East, and Slim got himself a idea. He was tendin' bar for Buck at the time. So Slim borrowed money to pay down on the place, and paid it off so much a month. Maybe it ain't all paid off yet, but he's doin' all right. Slim shore turned over a new leaf."

"I'm glad to see him gettin' ahead," said Skeeter Bill. "Well, I'll be headin' for some food, I reckon, Muddy. See yuh later."

Margie Edwards dropped a tray of dishes flat on the floor, and stood there, staring at Skeeter Bill, ignoring the broken glass and crockery. Only a few people were in the little restaurant at the time. The crash was terrific, bringing the cook-proprietor, Shorty Hale, from the kitchen on the run. He blurted:

"My gawsh, can't yuh even—" and then he stopped, staring up at Skeeter Bill.

"Howdy, Shorty," said Skeeter calmly.

"Well—huh—howdy! Skeeter Bill Sarg!"

"I'm sorry," said the woman quietly. "It—it slipped."

"That's all right," assured Shorty. "I'll get a broom."

Margie Edwards looked at Skeeter and down at the mess on the floor. She said, "I'll be off shift in about ten minutes, Skeeter."

"Sorry I scared yuh," he smiled slowly.

"You didn't. You shocked me, Skeeter."

Shorty came back with a broom and a dust-pan.

Skeeter said, "Shorty, I'd like to have about six eggs, sunny side up, and a lot of coffee. The pie can wait until I'm through."

"Comin' right up," grinned Shorty. "My, my, you ain't changed a bit, Skeeter. Six eggs and coffee—and the pie awaits. Set down with him, Miz Edwards, I'll do the waitin' this time."

II

LESS than an hour later, Skeeter sat with Mrs. Edwards on the porch of their little house, which was only an unpainted shack, discussing the misfortunes of the Edwards family. Margie Edwards was still a pretty woman, in spite of her hard work, trying to keep her family together. The two children were in school.

"I hear from Hooty almost every week," she told Skeeter. "He's grown bitter."

"If Hooty pulled that job, why wouldn't he be bitter?" asked Skeeter.

"He didn't!" declared Margie flatly. "I don't care what the law says. Everybody was against him, because the breaking of the bank just about broke everybody in the valley. They took the ranch and all the stock, trying to get something out of it."

"Did Hooty need money, Margie?"

The woman nodded. "He did, but only to expand. Hooty wanted to raise better cattle, and breeding stock is expensive. The bank wouldn't help him. They said he had hair-brained ideas."

Skeeter sighed and wiped his fore-

head with a sleeve.

"I can't figure out why Hooty didn't know what happened."

"He couldn't either, Skeeter. He says he only took three drinks in the Seven-Up Saloon that night, but he barely remembers getting on his horse. After that, it was a blank, he says."

"At the trial," said Skeeter," did any testimony show that Hooty had only three drinks?"

Mrs. Edwards nodded. "Yes, it did. Slim Lacey was tending bar at that time, and he said Hooty didn't drink enough to be drunk. He didn't think he had more than three drinks."

"Slim Lacey must have done pretty darn well," remarked Skeeter. "He was broke when I left here."

Mrs. Edwards nodded. "I guess he was. I never speak to him. One day he got fresh with me, and Hooty knocked out his front teeth. If you look close, he has a bridge for two front teeth."

"I'd like to have seen that!" Skeeter Bill smiled.

Mrs. Edwards admitted that she wasn't making much money and that Shorty Hale wasn't the best boss on earth.

She said, "He was all ready to explode over the broken dishes, when he saw you, Skeeter. He'd have probably fired me on the spot."

"Yeah, I reckon so." Skeeter grinned. "Sometimes I believe I have a calmin' influence on folks, Margie."

They sat there and talked, until the two children came home.

Nellie was nine, a slip of a girl, with big, blue eyes, looking very much like her mother, but Bill was husky, red-headed, and had eyes like his father. Nellie was shy of this tall stranger, but Bill let out a whoop. He remembered Skeeter Bill, and shook hands with him.

"Gee!" he said, "It's kind of like home, Mom. Where have you been, Mr. Sarg?"

"Down in Texas, Bill, followin' dogies. Yuh're sure growin' up fast. How old are yuh, Bill?"

"I'll be twelve next Saturday."

"Yeah, that's right. Twelve years old. Bill, I was the first outsider to poke a finger at yuh, don'tcha know it?" ,

"Mom told me you was. We were talkin' about you a while ago, kind of wonderin' where you were. And now you're here."

"Talkin' about me?" marveled Skeeter Bill. "Well, I do know! Bill, what would yuh like to have for yore birthday?"

Young Bill thought it over soberly.

Finally he said, "If I could have just what I want, I'd take—my dad."

Skeeter looked at Bill's mother, and there were tears in her eyes. No one had any comments, until Skeeter said quietly:

"Yeah, I reckon we'd all like that, Bill. Well, I guess I'll kind of drift back and see who I can talk to. Yuh never know who is glad to see yuh back. I'll see yuh some more, folks."

"You are welcome to stay here with us, Skeeter," said Mrs. Edwards quickly. "Our home is your home."

"That's shore sweet of yuh, Margie," he said soberly. "No, I couldn't do that. But I'll be around."

Skeeter Bill picked up his big hat and went slowly up the dirt street.

Young Bill said," Mom, he's an awful lot like Dad."

MARGIE nodded thoughtfully and went into the house.

Nellie said, "Gee, Bill, is that the man you was named after?"

"That's right, Sis. I hope I grow up with long legs and big hands like he's got. They say he can take a mean steer and stand him right on his head."

"Why?" asked Nellie.

"Aw, you're just a girl—you wouldn't understand. Let's go in and help Mom get supper."

Skeeter Bill wandered up to the Seven-Up Saloon. Few people were in the place, and Slim Lacey was sitting at a card-table, reading a newspaper. He nodded to Skeeter, who went over and sat down with Slim.

"How does the old place look to yuh?" asked Slim, folding the paper and tossing it aside.

"Same as ever. Slim, I want to ask yuh a few questions. I heard about

Hooty Edwards in Temple Rock. On that night, how many drinks did Hooty take in here?"

Slim smiled shortly. "Skeeter, I can't swear to it but I think he took about three. Mebbe it was four. But no more."

"Whisky?"

"Yeah. I don't believe he ever drank anythin' else."

"Any special kind of whisky, Slim?"

"No. Just bar-whisky, out of a barrel. What's this all about?"

Skeeter looked thoughtfully at Slim for several moments.

"Slim," he said confidentially," I'm goin' to prove that Hooty never robbed that bank."

"How?" asked Slim blankly.

"A lot of other folks would like to know, too, Slim. Keep this under yore hat, will yuh? I don't want to be interrupted in my job. You'll know later, but keep it dark, Slim. See yuh later."

Skeeter went over to the general store, where he bought a package of tobacco and cigarette papers. Then he sat down on the shaded porch to enjoy a smoke and commune with his own soul.

"Bill Sarg," he told himself," yuh're crazy, but it's pleasant. If I can make enough people believe that I know somethin', I might find out more'n I know now. Anyway, one more lie won't hurt my immortal soul, I reckon."

He was sitting there when a lone rider came into town, started to draw up at the Seven-Up Saloon, but swung around and came over to the hotel hitchrack. Skeeter Bill grinned slowly. The rider was Fuzzy Davis, owner of the Bar D spread, and one of the most explosive characters Skeeter had ever known.

Fuzzy was only a few inches over five feet tall, and in wet weather he might weigh a hundred pounds but that hundred pounds was all fighting man. He wore a five, triple A boot, but his .45 was as big as anybody carried on their hip.

He tied his horse, swore a little under his breath, as he stepped up on the sidewalk, and then he saw Skeeter Bill. He didn't say anything at once. He blinked, looked away, adjusted his neckerchief and cleared his throat raspingly. Then he looked at Skeeter once more.

"Mebbe," he remarked quietly. "it's the heat, and ag'in mebbe it's my general run-down condition but doggone it—you look like somebody I've known. Set my mind at rest, will yuh?"

"Hyah yuh, Fuzzy," Skeeter Bill said with a grin.

"You ole *pelicano!*" snorted Fuzzy. "You darned ole— How are yuh, Skeet?"

"Finer'n the down on a gnat, Fuzzy. Set down, you little anteater. How've yuh been, anyway?"

Fuzzy sat down and drew a deep breath. "I'm terrible," he whispered. "I'm mad, and when I'm mad, I'm terrible."

"You look fine, Fuzzy."

"That's the whole trouble with me, Skeet. The finer I look, the worse I am. I'll betcha that when I'm dead, they'll say, 'Well, well, there's Fuzzy Adams, I never seen him look better.'"

"You ain't sick, are yuh?" asked Skeeter Bill.

FROWNING, the pint-sized rancher shook his head. "Shucks, no! I'm mad, I tell yuh! Listen, will yuh? This mornin' I went over to my big waterhole at Hangin' Rock. You know the place. It's fenced, along with about seven hundred acres. Water's scarce around here, and there was only enough for my few dogies. Well, sir, some sticky-rope son-of-a-gun had tied off on about a quarter-mile of almost new barb-wire all over creation. My spring was almost dry and around it was every blasted Tomahawk, JML and Tumblin' K cow in the valley."

"That," remarked Skeeter Bill, "Don't sound like a joke."

"It wasn't intended as no joke, Skeet. The ends was cut as slick as a whistle. I dunno if I'll ever git that water-hole cleaned out and built up again. See why I'm mad? Yuh do? Well, yuh're an observin' sort of a feller, Skeet. How come yore back here, and where yuh been?"

"Been down in Texas, Fuzzy. Yuh see, I—well, you knew that Hooty Edwards named his boy after me, didn't yuh?"

"Hooty," replied Fuzzy, "was prone to do fool things. Go on with yore alibi, son."

"Well, I came back to help the kid celebrate his twelfth birthday, Fuzzy. And look what I found out!"

"Yuh mean—about Hooty? Oh, yeah. Well, that was bad, Skeet. I'd have sworn that Hooty was honest, even if he did name his kid after you. Honest, but slightly ignorant, as yuh might say."

"I appreciate yore sympathy for the boy," said Skeeter soberly. "But just what are yuh goin' to do about that water-hole?"

"Me? What am I goin' to do about it? Huh! I'm goin' to get the sheriff to swear out a warrant for Dan Houk. Me and him ain't friends, yuh understand. We ain't been for years. It's jist like the big spit-in-the-crick to do a think like that."

"Any proof, Fuzzy?"

"There yuh go! Dad blame it, yuh're as bad as Emmy! Proof? You'll git sued for false charges. Dad blast it, ain't this a free country? You stilt-legged gallinipper, comin' up here from Texas, tellin' me what to do! It's my water-hole, ain't it? Well, don't set there and grin like a monkey with a stomach ache. Say somethin'."

"How is Aunt Emmy, Fuzzy?"

"Well, that ain't exactly changin' the subject. She's fine."

"Still actin' as yore guardian angel, eh?"

"She sniffs my breath, if that's what yuh mean. Got the best nose for alcohol in the world. Her ma was scared by a bloodhound. Emmy is all right, except that she uses the Bible as a rule-book. She's ag'in the Devil, I know that. I ain't never knowed anybody so set against a entire stranger as she is ag'in the Devil. Pers'nally, I'd like to meet him and ask him how he stands it."

"Mebbe it's the heat, Fuzzy. If yuh get hot enough yuh can stand anythin'. How's the Bar D goin', except for the water-hole?"

"Well, pretty good, Skeet. Have yuh got a horse here? Yuh have? Go hang the hull on him, and we'll be goin'."

"Yuh mean, yuh're invitin' me out to the ranch?" asked Skeeter.

"I am not—I'm orderin' yuh. Emmy'd never forgive me if I told her you was in town and didn't come out with me. And you know what it means to not have forgiveness for yore sins, Skeet."

Skeeter Bill had known Aunt Emma Davis for years. Tall, rawboned, severe-looking, her wispy, colorless hair drawn tightly to a frizzly-looking knob at the back of her head, she stood on the porch of the Bar D ranchhouse, shading her eyes against the sun as Skeeter Bill and Fuzzy rode up to the porch.

"Emmy," called Fuzzy," I found me a prodigal son."

Skeeter grinned, and Mrs. Davis leaned out further, clinging with one hand to a porch-post.

"Skeeter Bill!" she half-screamed. "You—you git off that horse and come here! Where on earth did you come from?"

"Aunt Emma, I'm fresh from Texas," he grinned.

"You're fresh from any place you come from, young man. Unpin yourself from that saddle. My, my! You're the last man I ever expected to see! I had a hunch that you two was the sheriff and deputy, comin' in to tell me that Fuzzy was in jail or among the angels. Yuh see, he had a awful mad expression when he left here. No, I ain't goin' to kiss you, Skeeter. Fuzzy's the only man I ever kissed, and don't make any funny remarks about it. I realize that I've missed a lot in life."

III

FUZZY took the two horses down to the stable, while Skeeter Bill sat down on the shaded porch with Mrs. Davis. She didn't ask questions but waited for Skeeter Bill to tell what he wanted to tell.

"Yuh're lookin' fine, Aunt Emma," remarked Skeeter.

"I look just like I've looked for

twenty years and it ain't fine. Time don't improve me, Skeeter. You ain't changed."

"I'm so good-lookin'," said Skeeter soberly, "that any change would have to be for the worse. I feel good, too. Yuh remember that Hooty and Margie named their boy after me, don't yuh?"

Aunt Emma nodded. "A terrible thing to wish upon a helpless young one, Skeeter, but go ahead."

"He's twelve next Saturday. I asked him what he wanted for his birthday and he said he wanted his dad."

Mrs. Davis looked sharply at Skeeter Bill. "You wasn't here, when Hooty Edwards—got in trouble, Skeeter. You don't know what it meant to the folks of Road-Runner Valley. It busted the bank, and busted all of us. Most of us ain't got back on our feet since—I know we ain't. I feel awful sorry for Margie and her two kids, but I can't feel sorry for Hooty."

"You feel sure that he done it, Aunt Emma?"

She nodded quickly. "It's a cinch, Skeeter. It didn't take the jury five minutes all to agree that he was guilty. Even his own lawyer said they didn't have a leg to stand on. It made it awful hard for Margie. Lots of folks act like she was guilty, too, but she didn't have no hand in it. The two kids had a hard time in school, too. Most of their parents went busted in the deal, and it ain't nice for kids, havin' fingers pointed at 'em."

"Hooty was my friend, Aunt Emma," said Skeeter slowly.

"I know he was. You two was thicker than seven fingers on one hand but hard facts are hard facts, Skeeter."

"Yeah, I reckon so. What became of the banker and his wife?"

"Oh, they moved away. Henry Weldon ran the bank for Phoenix men, and they closed it. Never opened since. The loot was close to a hundred thousand dollars, they said, but nobody ever found where Hooty cached it. He swore he didn't know what he done."

Fuzzy came up from the stable and sat down, mopping his brow.

"How'd yuh like to ride out to Hangin' Rock Spring?" he asked. "I've got my two cow-pokes out there, tryin' to bring order out of chaos, as Emmy says."

"I'd like to," said Skeeter, rising.

'Don't be too late," said Mrs. Davis. "I'll have supper ready at six o'clock."

"I ain't never been late to a meal out here, Aunt Emma," Skeeter said with a grin, and added," And, as a matter of fact, I ain't had a good meal since."

On the way out there Fuzzy explained about water troubles in Road-Runner Valley.

"I had to fence Hangin' Rock," he explained. "The other spreads have got more water than I have and they wanted to keep me from havin' any. It was my property and not open range. The court decided that for me. But—well, you can see what happened."

"You and Dan Houk ain't friends, eh?"

"Never have been, Skeet. He'd like to run me out."

"They tell me that the bank took over Hooty's place and sold it to Sam Keenan."

"Yeah, that's right. The bank sold the stock, but sold the ranch to Sam. He got it dirt-cheap, too."

They found Len Riggs and Ollie Ashley, Fuzzy's two cowpunchers, at the spring, working with shovels, trying to repair the damage that the cattle had made. Both of them remembered Skeeter Bill.

Skeeter rode over and looked at the tangled wires, where they had been left. This was a real menace to range stock, no matter what the brand. He rode down along the fence-line, looking it over. Some of the posts had been set so loosely the wire had pulled them out.

SKEETER was sitting on his horse, studying the situation, when his gaze fell upon an object beside some trampled brush. He swung down, without dismounting, and picked it up. It was a raw-hide honda with about a foot of hard-twist lariat rope still attached. Evidently a rope had snapped from the wires or a post and the honda had been flung aside where the rider

had not been able to find it.

Skeeter looked it over carefully, took off the piece of rope and put the honda in his pocket before riding back to the spring, where Fuzzy was working with the two cowboys.

They had the spring pretty well cleaned out, but it would do little good without a fence. They tied their lariat ropes to the tangled wires, and managed to straighten them out. It was quite a job, getting the fence back where it would obstruct cattle from the spring and putting the wire back where it would not tangle cattle.

"Who's ridin' for Dan Houk now?" asked Skeeter, as they rode back to the ranch-house.

"Ab Steele, Jim Grush and Andy Case," replied Fuzzy.

"Does Sam Keenan still ramrod his own outfit?"

"No, he's got a feller named Johnny Greer. He's a good man, too."

"Looks to me like a turkey-necked gun-slinger from Texas," declared Len Riggs. "Chaws his tobacco and his right hand is always crooked, ready to fit a gun-butt."

"Len is a natural born fault-finder," Fuzzy explained. "Why, he can't even see any good in me."

"That," said Skeeter, smiling, "is an intelligent state of bein'."

Len whooped and slapped his leg with a quirt. "That's a good one!" he declared. "I still don't like Johnny Greer."

"If he wasn't all right, Sam Keenan wouldn't have him, yuh can bet on that," declared Fuzzy. "Sam's particular."

Mrs. Davis had a big supper ready for them and they all did justice to it. Skeeter declared it was the first real meal he had eaten since he left Road-Runner Valley. He wanted to go back to town that evening but the Davises vetoed that at once.

Skeeter Bill and Fuzzy went to Yellow Butte next day. Fuzzy wanted to talk with the sheriff about the vandalism, as he called it. Al Creedon, the sheriff, listened attentively, and said he'd see what could be done about it. While they were talking, Sam Keenan and his foreman, Johnny Greer, walked in. Keenan introduced Greer to Skeeter Bill, and Fuzzy told them what happened at Hanging Rock.

"Well, did yuh get yore fence fixed again?" asked Keenan.

"Yeah, after a fashion, Sam."

"Well, if yuh need more men, I'll send some over, Fuzzy."

"No, we got it fixed pretty good. It'll need a little more wire, but I've got that at the ranch."

"The only thing is," remarked the sheriff, "will it be torn down again by the same persons? If they done it once —yuh know."

"Might be interestin'." Skeeter Bill was grinning. "If they come back again, they might be surprised, 'cause I'm watchin' that particular part of these United States."

"What do yuh mean, Skeet?" asked the sheriff curiously.

"Just what I said, Sheriff. They hadn't better come back and start grabbin' wire again.'

"That watchin'," said the sheriff. "It might be a long job."

"Yeah, it might. But who has more time than I have? They don't need to hurry. I like to loaf in the shade."

Skeeter Bill and Fuzzy left the office and went up the street. The little cattleman was grimly serious.

He said, "What'd yuh tell 'em that for, Skeet?"

"Well, it's true, Fuzzy."

"True, shucks! You ain't goin' to watch that water-hole."

Skeeter stopped short and looked down at Fuzzy.

"Who's goin' to stop me—you?" he asked.

Fuzzy shoved his hands deep in his pockets and glared up at Skeeter Bill.

"You ain't tryin' to antagonize me, are yuh?" he asked.

"I'm tellin' yuh to stay down on yore own level. Don't contradict a grown man, Fuzzy. I'm goin' to watch that water-hole."

FUZZY cuffed his old sombrero over one eye and spat into the dusty street.

"Well, if yuh are," he said complain-

ingly, "Why tell everybody what yuh're goin' to do. That ain't usin' good sense."

"I don't care who knows it, Fuzzy. That way, I won't have to shoot some innocent friend of mine. I'd hate that."

"Yore logic," declared Fuzzy, "is as uneven as a corduroy bridge over a rock-pile. If they know yo're watchin' 'em, they won't come out there."

"And the fence don't get torn down again," added Skeeter.

"Yuh've got me beat," sighed Fuzzy. "When yuh left for Texas yuh was at least half-witted—but yuh deteriorated —badly."

Skeeter Bill's eyes twinkled. "I like bein' crazy," he said. "It makes thinkin' so easy on the head. And another thing, Fuzzy—when yuh're crazy, nobody can figure out why yuh do crazy things."

"Mebbe it's the heat," sighed Fuzzy, "I dunno, I reckon we better go back to the ranch, where mebbe Emmy can talk some sense into yore empty head, Skeet"

They went back to the ranch and Fuzzy told his wife what Skeeter Bill insisted on doing. To his surprise, she said:

"Well, I think that is just lovely of him!"

"You—u-u-uh—why, shore it is," agreed Fuzzy. "You ain't ailin' nowhere, are yuh, Emmy?"

"Why?"

"Well, I dunno—I jist thought—oh, well, let it lay. He wants a couple blankets, a pair of overalls, a shirt and a old hat."

"What's he going to do—impersonate an Injun?"

"I dunno, Emmy. If yuh want my opinion, I'd say—"

"I don't, Fuzzy," interrupted Aunt Emma sharply. "If Skeeter wants something, get it for him."

"Yes'm, shore. Bein' as you both act crazy, maybe I'm the one that's plumb loco. I dunno."

It was after dark when Skeeter Bill rode away from the Bar D ranchhouse, blankets and clothes tied behind his saddle. He also carried some doughnuts, a tin cup and a canteen of cold water. He refused to say what he intended doing out there, just grinned.

He did not ride up to the spring but tied his horse in a mesquite thicket and walked the last two hundred yards in the brush. The brush crowded in fairly close to the spring but to the north was a spread of open country, covered only with knee-high growth. Near the spring was a pile of old posts, left over from the fencing.

Skeeter scouted the country fairly well, but it was too dark for him to see any considerable distance. He cut some brush and sat down behind the pile of posts, working in the dark, Skeeter was not an artist, and his creation wouldn't even have fooled a wary crowd, but from a distance it might be mistaken for a man.

The neck and head was a broken piece of fence-post, to which he tied a stick, over which he fitted the old coat. After due deliberation he fastened it into the post-pile, with only the head and shoulders showing above the pile. Then he draped the overalls over the posts, giving the right effect for anyone viewing the spring from the south side. Skeeter did not have light enough to look it over critically. Then he took his blankets back in the mesquite, found an opening, and stretched out for the night, looking up at the stars.

"This is Tuesday night," he said half-aloud, "and Bill's birthday is Saturday. Maybe I'm seven kinds of a darned fool but I ain't quittin' on Bill's druthers—until I have to quit."

Skeeter Bill's range training had taught him to awaken at any unusual sound, but he slept right through until the light of a false-dawn painted the hills for a few minutes. It was cold up there in the brush.

He watched the real dawn spread slowly across the divide, sending streamers of color onto the high points around the valley. He sat up in his blankets, buckled on his gun-belt and drew in deep breaths of the morning air.

Suddenly he jerked to his knees, flinging the blankets a side. From somewhere, fairly close, came the whip-like crack of a rifle. Twice more it blasted, the echoes clattering back from the hills. Skeeter Bill was on his feet, gun

in hand, hunched low. Then he went swiftly out along the brush to where he could see the spring and the pile of posts. His dummy was piled up at the foot of the post-pile, the hat six feet away!

IV

CAUTIOUSLY Skeeter lifted his head. The shots had come from the north, and Skeeter caught sight of something moving. It was a man, or men, on horseback. Skeeter's view was only momentary but Skeeter Bill was not being fooled by anybody. He stayed right there for at least fifteen minutes. There was not a sound. Several cows drifted in from the south and began drinking.

Skeeter Bill walked out and looked at his dummy. One bullet had hit the hat, gone through the thin piece of fence post, mushroomed badly, and blown a hole five inches across at the front of the old hat. Another bullet had struck about a foot lower on the post, and had split it into two pieces. The bullet-hole was a foot below the top of the collar. The third bullet had missed.

"Mighty good shootin' in that light," said Skeeter Bill, his face grim. "Either of those bullets would have blasted the life out of a man."

Skeeter Bill took the coat, hat and overalls. He threw them on his blankets before starting up the slope. He was careful, as he went up through the brush. The killer might not be quite satisfied with his own convictions, and come back to verify them. Bill worked his way slowly, watching the ground. He had gone about a hundred yards when he found where a boot-heel had cut into the dirt.

Then he found where a horse had been tied, and more boot-prints. It was not difficult for Skeeter Bill to backtrack those high-heel tracks, because the man had made no attempt to disguise his trail. Finally he found the spot where the man had rested, waiting for daylight, and here he discovered three empty brass hulls where the man's rifle had flung them. They were of thirty-thirty caliber and of a well-known brand. Skeeter looked them over carefully and put them in his pocket.

Then he got down on his hands and knees, examining every inch of the dirt around where the man had waited. He rolled and smoked a cigarette before going back to his blankets, which he rolled up, with the bullet-marked clothes, and went to his horse.

Breakfast was almost ready at the ranchhouse as Skeeter dismounted and carried his bundle up to the house. Fuzzy greeted him at the door.

Skeeter Bill merely unrolled the bundle, handed the hat to Fuzzy for examination, and held up the coat for him to look through. Fuzzy squinted at Skeeter, his jaw sagging a little.

"I made up a dummy," said Skeeter, "and that's what they done to it. Three shots—two of 'em dead-center."

Aunt Emma and the two cowboys came in to look at the remains, and they all stood around, solemn-faced.

Fuzzy said, "That kind of ruins my appetite for breakfast, Skeet."

"Dead-center—twice!" breathed Len Riggs. "How far, Skeet?"

"At least a hundred yards—and in awful bad light, too."

"Breakfast is ready," said Aunt Emma soberly.

There was little conversation at breakfast. For once in her life, Aunt Emma had no suggestions. This was a serious business. When they had finished Skeeter and Fuzzy stood outside together.

Fuzzy said, "Skeet, you must have been lookin' for somethin' like this, or yuh wouldn't have made up that dummy."

Skeeter Bill smiled slowly. "Just a hunch, Fuzzy—a hunch that worked out."

"I'm still fightin' my hat," said Fuzzy. "Yuh mean to say that they want water so bad that they're willin' to murder to keep that spring unfenced?"

Skeeter shook his head slowly. "I don't, Fuzzy. This deal goes back a couple years, I believe. Somebody don't want Skeeter Bill Sarg in circulation."

"Hu-u-uh? You mean—they're gunnin' for you Skeet?"

"They knew I was watchin' that water-hole, Fuzzy, and they believed I was dumb enough to set on that post-pile. My hunch is that the water ain't got a thing to do with it."

Fuzzy Davis' eyes held a strained, nervous expression, as he tried to get the situation straight in his own mind. It was difficult to puzzle out anyone's reasons for wanting to kill Skeeter Bill. Finally he said:

"I don't sabe the deal, Skeet. You ain't had no trouble with anybody around here. Shucks, you jist got here."

"Take a look at that old hat," said Skeeter soberly, "and don't forget they thought my head was inside it."

SKEETER BILL wanted to go to town, so Fuzzy went with him. They tied their horses to the rail in front of the general store where Skeeter wanted to buy more tobacco. Emory Van Ness, the old merchant shook hands warmly with Skeeter Bill, and sold him the tobacco.

"I heard you was in town, Skeeter," he said. "Going to stay with us for a while, I hope."

"Yuh can't never tell about me," replied Skeeter Bill. "I'm a tumble-weed, Emory."

Skeeter's eyes swept over the supply of rifle and revolver ammunition on a shelf behind him, but did not see the brand of rifle cartridges he had found at the water-hole.

"Do yuh need some shells?" asked Fuzzy.

"I've got plenty for my six-shooter," replied Skeeter. "Have you got a thirty-thirty, Fuzzy?"

"Yeah, I've got one, but the firin'-pin is busted. Been layin'-off to get it fixed, but there ain't no gunsmith around here."

Skeeter mentioned the brand of the shells he had found at the water-hole, but Van Ness shook his head slowly.

"We ain't had none of them for a couple months. Got some ordered. Sam Keenan bought the last box I had. Them others are the same thing. In fact, I have more calls for them."

They left the store, and Skeeter Bill drifted down to the New York Chop House to say hello to Margie Edwards but she was not in evidence. Another woman was waiting on the tables.

Shorty Hale, the owner, came out from the kitchen, his face just a bit sheepish. Skeeter Bill asked about Margie.

Shorty said, "She quit the job last night."

"Yea-a-ah? Did she get a better job, Shorty?"

"She—she didn't say. Just left."

Skeeter went down to the little house and found Mrs. Edwards laboring over a wash-tub.

"Shorty told me you'd quit the restaurant, Margie," Skeeter said.

"Shorty must be getting polite," she said. "He fired me."

Skeeter looked sharply at her. "What for, Margie?"

"I don't know. We didn't have any trouble. Everything was going along all right but when my shift was finished, he told me that I didn't need to come back." She brushed a lock of hair off her forehead. "I don't know what I am going to do now."

Skeeter Bill turned abruptly and left the house, his long legs taking long strides, as he went back to the restaurant. Shorty came out to the counter and found Skeeter Bill waiting for him. The expression on Skeeter's face was not pleasant, as he said quietly:

"Why did yuh lie to me, Shorty Hale? She didn't quit."

Shorty swallowed painfully, but tried to bluster.

"After all—well, she—"

"Go ahead, Shorty. What did she do—or say?"

"Nothin'," admitted Shorty miserably. "Listen, Skeeter—this is between me and you—I don't own this place—I work here. The owner said to get rid of her and I had to do it. Honest I did."

"Who owns it, Shorty?"

Shorty Hale shook his head. "I can't tell yuh, Skeeter. If I did, I'd lose my job. I'm supposed to own the place.

Don't tell anybody that I don't. I jist had to tell you."

"Sam Keenan?" asked Skeeter quietly. Shorty blinked rapidly.

"I can't tell yuh, Skeeter. It's my job."

"Shorty, I want an honest answer; does Sam Keenan try to hang around Margie Edwards?"

"I—I hear he does," whispered Shorty. "I don't reckon it's any secret. He kinda liked her—before Hooty got sent up. It ain't none of my business, but I heard that he asked her to get a divorce and marry him only a week ago—and she refused. She's kind of foolish. Sam could give her everythin' and take care of them two kids."

"Much obliged, Shorty. I won't mention it."

"I—I hope yuh don't. I need this job, Skeeter."

Fuzzy Davis was waiting for Skeeter Bill in front of the general store. Skeeter said, "Fuzzy, let's ride out to the Tumblin' K and see Sam Keenan. We can cut across the hills from there."

GRUMPILY Fuzzy said it was all right with him, but wondered why Skeeter wanted to go to the Tumbling K. In fact, he was trying hard to understand this tall, long-legged cowpuncher, who had always been more or less of an enigma. On the way out Skeeter said:

"Fuzzy, did you ever know that Sam Keenan was tryin' to shine around Margie Edwards?"

"Well—uh—oh, I've heard he was. Never paid no attention, myself. Why?"

"I just wondered," replied Skeeter Bill.

Sam Keenan's place was a regular bachelor ranchhouse, with very few refining touches. There was a long, rickety porch. A man was sitting on the steps, working over a gun. He was "Arizona" Ashley, who had been Keenan's cook for years, a thin, wiry oldtimer. He shook hands violently with Skeeter Bill and Fuzzy, and invited them to sit in the shade.

Ashley said, "Sam went to Silver Springs yesterday afternoon and the boys are all workin'. Sam'll prob'ly be back late this afternoon. How have yuh been, Skeeter?"

"Just fine, Arizona. Yuh're lookin' well."

"Yeah, I'm all right."

"What are yuh doin'—gettin' ready for a war?" asked Fuzzy.

Arizona grinned. "No, I hope I ain't, Fuzzy. The boys are allus kickin' about the way this gun shoots, so I thought I'd tinker it a little. Just gettin' ready to try it out. See that tin can on top of the mesquite out there, Skeet? See if you can hit it."

Skeeter took the rifle cuddled the butt against his shoulder, and carefully squeezed the trigger. The tin-can jumped into the air and disappeared. Skeeter Bill levered out the empty shell, and handed the gun to Arizona, who said:

"See anythin' wrong with that gun, Skeet?"

"It shoots where yuh hold it, Arizona."

"That's what I allus tell the boys—it ain't the gun, it's you."

"Skeet always could shoot the eye out of a gnat," said Fuzzy.

"And never lift its eyebrow," added Arizona soberly. "It's jist a gift, that's all. Some folks never can learn. Are yuh stayin' at Fuzzy's place, Skeet?"

"Yeah, for a few days. I'm sort of a drifter, Arizona."

"I know yuh are, and I'm sorry, Skeet. It don't pay. I used to want to keep movin', but I finally got smart, and I says to me:

" 'Arizony, yuh're gettin' old. A rollin' stone gathers no moss. You get a good, steady job and stick with it.' And that's what I've done. I've been here eighteen years, and look what I've got."

"What have yuh got?" asked Skeeter Bill.

"A steady job and I only owe three dollars and six bits. Yuh never can tell how I'd be fixed if I kept on driftin'."

"Yuh've made a lot of sacrifices to git where yuh are, too," remarked Fuzzy. "I 'member when yuh didn't have anythin'."

"That's before I got smart, Fuzzy."

V

DECLINING to wait and eat supper at the Tumbling K, Skeeter Bill and Fuzzy cut across the hills to the Bar D. Aunt Emma was a little worried.

She said, "After what happened this mornin', I'd naturally worry."

"Nobody wants to hurt Fuzzy," said Skeeter Bill.

"They shot up a dummy, didn't they?"

"I resent that, Emmy," protested Fuzzy. "Mebbe the heat has affected yore good manners. Set down and fan yourself."

"I think I will," she smiled. "I've got the mulligan simmering on the stove, and the biscuits ready to shoot into the oven. That old stove is hotter than what sinners have facing them. Any news in Yellow Butte?"

"We didn't find any," sighed Fuzzy, fanning himself with his hat. "At least, I didn't—I dunno about Skeet. I seen him come from the New York Chop House, walkin' like the devil was proddin' him. He was gone a few minutes, and came back faster'n that. Into the Chop House he goes, stays a minute or two, and comes out."

"Keepin' cases on me, eh?" said Skeeter Bill. "I'd like to ask yuh a question, Fuzzy; did you ever hear that Sam Keenan owns the New York Chop House?"

"Sam Keenan? No, I never did, Skeet. Where'd yuh get that idea?"

"Things kind of come to me," replied Skeeter Bill.

"How is Margie Edwards?" asked Aunt Emma.

"She got fired," replied Skeeter Bill. "Shorty told me she quit, and she said she was fired. So I put it up to Shorty and he said that he didn't own the cafe but took orders from the owner, and that the owner had told him to fire Margie."

"Aw, I think he's tryin' to crawl out of it, Skeet."

"If I thought he was, I'd drown him in his own soup."

"By golly, that's it!" exclaimed Fuzzy.

"What's it?" asked Skeeter Bill quickly.

"A sensible use for Shorty Hale's soup. At that, it might be too thin to drown a man. You can breathe it without difficulty."

"Fuzzy!" exclaimed Aunt Emma. "That is ridiculous. But, Skeeter, what on earth gave you the idea that Sam Keenan might own that restaurant?"

"I dunno," sighed Skeeter Bill, "I suppose I had a hunch."

"You and yore hunches!" snorted Fuzzy.

"Go look at that old hat, Fuzzy, and the back of the coat."

"Yea-a-ah, I reckon yuh do have flashes of intelligence. Sometimes I get smart, too."

"When?" asked Aunt Emma soberly.

Fuzzy turned to Skeeter. "Ain't it like a woman—allus tryin' to pin yuh down to a exact date?"

"And never gettin' an answer," said Aunt Emma, heading back for the kitchen.

Ollie Ashley and Len Riggs wanted to go to Yellow Butte, and Skeeter Bill decided to go with them, against the protests of Fuzzy Davis, who declared that Skeeter might run into trouble, especially in the dark.

"Trouble is my middle name, Fuzzy," Skeeter Bill told him. "I'll be all right. Besides that, I've got two good men with me."

"Them two?" scoffed Fuzzy. "Lot of help they'd be. I can snap my fingers and make 'em both go for cover."

"When, for instance?" asked Ollie soberly.

"Aw, yuh're just like Emmy, allus askin' for dates. Go ahead and get killed. Might improve the country—I dunno."

Ollie and Len tied their horses at the Seven-Up Saloon, but Skeeter rode straight down to the Edwards house. He tied his horse to the rickety fence and went up to the lighted house. Young Bill came to the door to welcome Skeeter Bill. Margie and Nellie were reading a book. They were delighted to see Skeeter.

Margie said, "You went out of here so

fast yesterday that I had a feeling you were mad at me."

"Shucks, I never get mad at my friends," said Skeeter with a smile. "I just had somethin' on my mind at that time."

They sat and talked for an hour, before the two children went to bed. After they were gone Skeeter Bill asked Margie if she knew who owned the New York Chop House.

"Shorty Hale," she replied.

"Shorty says he don't, and that he had orders from the owner to fire you."

"That's funny, Skeeter; everybody believes that Shorty owns it. And if there were another owner, why would he want to fire me? I haven't done anything—not that I know about."

SKEETER BILL shook his head, hunched forward in an old rocker. Then he looked at her and said quietly:

"Margie, I don't want to pry into yore private affairs, but I'd like to know if Sam Keenan ever made love to you?"

Margie Edwards' laugh sounded forced, but she said, "It wouldn't be anything new—if he did, Skeeter."

"Wanted to marry yuh, eh?"

"Yes. But I wouldn't marry him, Skeeter. I told him I was waiting for Hooty to come back, and he said—well, he said I'd have a mighty long wait. I told him I'd get along all right."

"Were Hooty and Sam Keenan good friends?"

"Well I don't know if they were good friends, but they certainly weren't enemies, Skeeter. But what is all this about? You ask questions like a lawyer."

"I'm tryin' to make two and two equal six, Margie. I kind of feel that I've woke up some sleepin' dogs in Road-Runner Valley, and they ain't happy about havin' their sleep interrupted. I'll be on my way to the ranch, I reckon, but I'll be seein' yuh again, I hope."

"Be careful," she warned. "I don't know what you are trying to do, but it is probably something dangerous."

"I like it," he said, smiling at her. "Don't worry, Margie; this is only Tuesday."

He closed the door behind him, leaving her wondering what he meant about this only being Tuesday.

It was very dark out at the old fence, and Skeeter Bill almost had to find his horse by feel rather than by sight. As he slid the reins over the horse's head, something told him that danger was near him. There had not been a sound, but some sixth sense warned him.

Instantly he ducked low, intending to slide under the horse but a hissing rope slashed across his face, jerking tight over the bridge of his nose, and he was yanked backwards into the dirt. The horse whirled in against the fence when Skeeter Bill went down, and a voice snapped a curse.

Skeeter came down on one hip and elbow, and for a fraction of a second the rope slacked. In that fraction, Skeeter Bill drew his gun and shot blindly, trying to use that tightening rope as a guide. A man yelled sharply, and the rope fell away.

Quickly Bill jerked the rope from his eyes, going flat, gun ready. A shot blasted out, and the whirling horse went completely over Skeeter Bill but did not strike him. He heard a man running away along the fence as he got to his feet and caught his horse. Margie called from the doorway:

"Skeeter Bill! Skeeter, are you hurt?"

"I'm all right, Margie," he called. "Somebody was just foolin'. See yuh later."

The two kids crowded in behind their mother, questioning her about the shooting but she was unable to tell them what happened, except that Skeeter Bill said he was all right.

"I'll betcha he's a ring-tailed wolf in a fight," declared young Bill proudly. "Look at them shoulders! Man, I hope I grow up to be as good a man as he is. Mom. I bet dad would like that."

"Yes, I believe he would, Bill. Now go back to bed and forget it. Skeeter Bill can take care of himself.'

Skeeter rode back to the Bar D. Fuzzy and his wife were still up. Ollie and Len had already returned home and were in the bunkhouse. Skeeter's nose

was skinned, and there was a rope-burn over his left eye. He told them what happened.

Fuzzy said, "Skeet, things like that ain't no joke."

"I ain't jokin', Fuzzy. It's got me puzzled tryin' to figger why they tried to rope me. What their idea was I don't know, unless they figured on draggin' me around. Anyway, it turned out all right. I shot once, but I don't reckon I hit anybody. Come to think of it," said Skeeter thoughtfully, "I heard a man yelp."

"Well, that's the doggoneddest thing I ever heard!" exclaimed the little cowman. "Skeet, can't yuh tell us why they're aimin' to ease you off this mortal coil?"

"Yore guess is almost as good as mine, Fuzzy."

"Yeah, almost," said Fuzzy dryly. "Emmy, why don't you get into this discussion? Ain't you got no ideas?"

AUNT EMMA shook her head, and almost lost her glasses.

"I reckon we might as well go to bed," sighed Fuzzy," unless yuh want to stay up, Skeet, so as not to disappoint 'em if they come out here to finish up on yuh."

"No, I think they're too disappointed to try again tonight."

They were getting ready for bed, when they heard horses, coming up to the house. Fuzzy went over by the door, waiting for the visitors to knock, when a voice called:

"Fuzzy, this is Al Creedon!"

"The law is among us," whispered Fuzzy, and opened the door.

It was the sheriff, with his deputy, Muddy Poole. Skeeter Bill was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, and called a greeting to the officers.

"Ridin' late, ain't yuh, Al?" asked Fuzzy.

"Kinda. Glad yuh're home, Skeeter. We hoped you'd be."

"What's eatin' yuh, Al?" asked Skeeter curiously.

"About what happened tonight—at Edwards' house, Skeet. Several of us heard the two shots fired, but we had a hard time findin' where it was. Mrs. Edwards told us that it happened in front of her place, and that you said you was all right."

"That's right," admitted Skeeter. "Somebody tried to rope me in the dark."

"He's still got rope-burns on his eye and nose," said Aunt Emma.

The sheriff nodded. "Skeeter," he said, "did you know a feller named Dutch Held?"

Skeeter Bill shook his head. "I don't believe I ever did, Al."

"I've heard of him," said Fuzzy. "They say he's a bad boy."

"Was," said the sheriff. "Skeet, how many times did you shoot?"

"Once. Somebody shot at me, too. Just two shots fired. I've got a kind of hunch that I hit somebody."

"So have I," said the sheriff quietly.

Skeeter Bill looked sharply at the sheriff.

"What do yuh mean, Al?" he asked curiously.

"Where was yore horse, when you started to climb on him?"

"Why—right in front of the gate."

"Uh-huh. That makes the corner of the fence about twenty feet away. Well, Skeeter, we found Dutch Held at the corner of the fence, dead as a door-knob. He had one bullet through his right arm. In fact, it busted his arm at the elbow. The other bullet was in the back of his head. That one killed him instantly."

Skeeter Bill stared thoughtfully at the floor. That other shot had not been fired at him, but into the back of Dutch Held's head.

Fuzzy said, "It don't make sense, Al."

"What do you think, Skeeter?" asked Muddy Poole.

"There's only one thing to think, Muddy," replied Skeeter Bill, "The man who was with Dutch Held didn't want to fool around with a crippled man, so he blasted him down."

"That would be a terrible thing to do!" exclaimed Aunt Emma.

"Would yuh mind doin' a little talkin', Skeet?" asked the sheriff.

Skeeter Bill smiled slowly. "Go

ahead," he said, "I ain't got no favorite subjects, so select yore poison, Al."

"One of the boys from this spread intimated that somebody tried to murder you this mornin', Skeeter. They tried it again tonight. It just happens that I'm the sheriff of this county and things like that are my business. What's yore opinion?"

"I agree with yuh, Sheriff. Go right ahead and find out who is tryin' to kill me. It's all right with me."

"You mean you don't know?"

"Sheriff," replied Skeeter Bill seriously, "if I knew—sure—yuh don't think I'd be waitin' for them to try it again, do yuh?"

"Like I told yuh on the way out here, Al, we're wastin' our time," said Muddy Poole. The sheriff sighed and got to his feet.

"I reckon yuh're right, Muddy. I hope I see you again, Skeeter."

"That's a cinch," said Skeeter soberly. "You go ahead and hope that I can see you."

After the two officers had gone, Skeeter Bill said:

"Fuzzy, what do yuh know about this Dutch Held?"

"Well, he was a bad boy, Skeet. Suspected of rustlin', horse-stealin', smugglin'—finally, murder. Shot a feller in a holdup in Yuma. Dutch used to be around here once in a while, when he worked for the Double Circle Seven, north of Silver Springs. I hadn't heard anythin' about him lately."

"Much obliged, Fuzzy. Well, folks I reckon we can go to bed and get a good sleep. I think that somebody is awful disappointed over tonight's work—and it ain't me. Goodnight, folks."

"You better say your prayers," advised Aunt Emma.

Skeeter grinned at her and said, "Aunt Emma, how about you doin' it for me? My prayers never seemed to go high enough to do any good."

"I'd like that," said Fuzzy seriously. "It'll give her less time to implore the Lord to make me a better man. I dunno who she's holdin' up as an example."

VI

ALTHOUGH Fuzzy went to Yellow Butte with Skeeter Bill next day, he was not enthused over it at all. They talked with the sheriff, who told them that the inquest would be held Saturday forenoon, delayed because Doctor Boardman had to go to Crescent City on business. Skeeter Bill lost no time in going down to see the doctor, who was ready to drive away.

"I wanted to ask yuh a question, Doc," said Skeeter Bill. "On the day or two after Hooty Edwards was shot, was you called on to treat any sort of a gunshot wound?"

The gray-haired doctor shook his head. "No, I'm sure I wasn't, Sarg. I would have remembered it, I'm sure."

Skeeter Bill thanked him and went back to the main street, where he found Fuzzy Davis and told him he was going to Silver Springs.

"I'll be back for that inquest," he told Fuzzy. "Don't worry—I'll be here."

"Who's worryin'?' demanded the little cowman. "You must think yuh're awful important. Go ahead and get yourself shot. Silver Springs is a awful nice place to die. I'll tell Emmy to pray for yuh."

"Every little helps." Skeeter flashed a smile. "Much obliged, Fuzzy."

It was late Friday night when Skeeter Bill came back to the Bar D ranch. Aunt Emma fixed supper for him, and Fuzzy did a lot of hinting, but Skeeter did not mention why he went to Silver Springs.

Aunt Emma said, "Fuzzy and I have to be at the inquest tomorrow and they said you've got to be there, too. I saw Margie Edwards and they've told her to be present and bring the two kids."

Skeeter Bill smiled over his coffee. "We'll have a regular old-timers' reunion," he said. "Anythin' new, Fuzzy?"

"Nothin' unusual. I went out to Hangin' Rock water-hole but the fence is all right yet. Nobody shot at yuh in Silver Springs?"

"No, they treated me all right. Nice place over there."

"You can have it," replied Fuzzy.

"Yuh're goin' to the inquest, ain't yuh?"

"If I live—yeah."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Aunt Emma. "You ain't figurin' on gettin' killed between now and then, are yuh, Skeet?"

"Livin' in a benighted land like this, Aunt Emma, it don't do for anybody to plan too far ahead."

Saturday was always a big day in Yellow Butte. It was the shopping day for almost everybody in Road-Runner Valley and they not only brought their kids, but their dogs, as well. By ten o'clock all the available hitchrack space was taken. Fuzzy and Aunt Emma tied their horses behind the sheriff's office, along with Skeeter's horse.

They held the inquest in the courtroom at the courthouse, with Doctor Boardman, the coroner, officiating. The room was filled, long before the inquest was called to order. Mrs. Edwards and her two children, Fuzzy and Aunt Emma and Skeeter Bill, all being witnesses, were accorded a special number of seats at the front.

From his position Skeeter Bill could look over most of the crowd. Many of them he had known for a long time. In the front row of seats he could see Slim Lacey and Sam Keenan. Behind Lacey was Johnny Greer, Keenan's foreman, and some of his men. In the selection of a jury, Sam Keenan was chosen, along with five other men of Yellow Butte.

Sheriff Al Creedon and his deputy, Muddy Poole, had seats near the coroner, basking in the gaze of the proletariat.

Doctor Boardman opened the proceedings, outlining the circumstances of the finding of Dutch Held's body, and giving the cause of his death.

"In my opinion," stated the doctor, "someone held a forty-five almost against the back of Dutch Held's head and fired the fatal shot, the gun held so closely that it burned his hair."

He waited for that fact to soak into the crowd and then said:

"We will now call Skeeter Bill Sarg to the stand."

The coroner clumsily administered the oath for Skeeter Bill to tell the truth, and Skeeter swore that he would.

SKEETER took the chair, stretching his long legs. He shoved his holstered gun to a handy position.

The coroner said, "It is hardly proper to wear a gun on the witness stand."

"Who is liable to have more need of one, Doc?" asked Skeeter, and the crowd laughed. The doctor nodded, and said:

"Go ahead and tell the jury what happened in front of Mrs. Edwards' home."

Skeeter told them in detail of the attack on him, how he got out of it, and said that he didn't know anyone had been killed.

"I thought that shot was fired at me," he confessed, "until the sheriff came out to the Bar D and told me what happened."

"I understand that you do not know —did not know—Dutch Held, and that you do not know why the attack was made on you," said the doctor.

"I never met Dutch Held, but I deny the last statement, Doc."

The doctor stared at Skeeter for several moments, and asked quietly, "Do you mean to say you know why you were attacked?"

"I do," replied Skeeter Bill coldly. "They tried it before, Doc, but they shot a dummy, instead of me. It was good shootin', too, but yuh can't kill a fencepost, even if it is wearin' a hat. Yuh see," he continued, after a pause, "the dry-gulcher made a mistake. He never picked up the empty shells from his rifle. Almost every rifle leaves its own mark on a shell. Mebbe it's the way the firin'-pin hits the primer, a scratch on the shell, always in the same place. Doc, I found those shells and I shot a gun, just to get the empty shell—and they match.

"But wait a minute! This deal is older'n just a few days. It goes back to the conviction of Hooty Edwards. Yuh see, gents, a bartender put dope into Hooty's whisky that night, and that's why Hooty didn't know what happened. It's a cinch that no doped man could have robbed that bank. That man had to be cold sober.

"The sheriff swapped shots with the bank-robber that mornin' and the sher-

iff was sure he hit the man. Gentlemen, he did, but it wasn't Hooty Edwards. The man he hit went to a doctor for treatment of a gun-shot wound next day, but not to Doc Boardman. He was scared to do that."

There was a long silence in that big room. Every eye was on Skeeter Bill, waiting for him to continue. He moved his long legs, pulling his feet in close to his chair. Then he said in a brittle voice:

"Slim Lacey, keep yore hands in sight."

Suddenly Skeeter Bill flung himself sideways, landing on his knees, six feet away from the witness chair just as a bullet smashed into the back of the chair. Johnny Greer, hunched behind Slim Lacey, had drawn a gun, unnoticed by anybody, except Skeeter Bill, who had seen his shoulder action.

Skeeter Bill's gun flamed from his kneeling position, the bullet slashing across Lacey's shoulder, but centering Greer. The room was instantly in an uproar. Keenan, in the jury box, flung a man away from in front of him, giving him room to shoot. He fairly screamed:

"You dirty bloodhound, I'll—"

Skeeter's gun flamed again, and Keenan went to his knees over empty chairs, flinging his gun ahead of him. Men were clawing at each other, crashing over chairs, trying to get away from the line of fire. Someone yelled:

"Slim Lacey is gettin' away! Stop him!"

There was no chance to get through that milling crowd. Skeeter Bill whirled to the front windows. They were not built to be opened, but Skeeter hurled a chair through one of them, and went out onto the sidewalk as Slim Lacey ran from the entrance. The gambler saw Skeeter Bill, whirled, gun in hand, but caught his heel and went flat on his back, firing one shot straight into the air, before Skeeter's toe caught the gun and kicked it halfway across the street.

Men were piling out of the courthouse. Skeeter yanked the gambler to his feet. Al Creedon and Muddy Poole had fought their way loose from the crowd, and came running. One of the men was the gray-haired prosecutor, who had sent Hooty Edwards to the penitentiary, and his face was just a little white.

"I'll talk!" panted the frightened Lacey, cringing at the expression of the faces around him. "I—I didn't kill anybody. I gave Hooty the dope in his drink, but Keenan paid me to do it. I put it in his last drink, when he said he was going home."

"Keep goin'," said Skeeter Bill tensely.

THE gambler blurted out his confession hastily, in a high-pitched voice.

"Sam Keenan was broke, and he robbed the bank, and put the deadwood on Hooty Edwards. He—he wanted Edwards' wife. Then Keenan bought the Seven-Up and the New York Chop House. I didn't own the saloon, but everybody thought I did."

"Why did they try to kill me?" asked Skeeter Bill.

"Because they thought you knew too much. They wanted to make Fuzzy Davis sell the Bar D. That's why Keenan hired Greer, and Greer was an old bunkie of Dutch Held. Greer was the best shot in the state. He says he shot Dutch accidentally, when Dutch ducked in front of him. He was tryin' to kill you, Skeeter. That's all I know. But I didn't murder anybody—honest, I didn't!"

Muddy Poole snapped handcuffs on Slim Lacey and headed for the jail with him. Keenan wasn't dead, but badly hurt. They carried him outside; he was conscious. He said to Al Creedon and the prosecutor:

"Mrs. Edwards can have the Tumblin' K—it's hers. Where's Skeeter Bill?"

"Right here, Sam," replied the sheriff, pushing the tall cowpuncher forward.

Sam Keenan scowled up at Skeeter Bill, his voice weakening, as he said:

"You win, Sarg. But I'd like to live long enough to kill Doc Higgins over at Silver Springs, for tellin' you that he doctored a bullet-wound on me the day they got Hooty."

Skeeter Bill hunched down lower, his face grim, as he said:

"Yuh're wrong, Sam. Doc didn't tell me that. Yuh see, he wasn't comin' back to Silver Springs until today, so I couldn't wait."

"You—uh—" Keenan blinked painfully, as he realized what had happened. Then he said, "But you found that matchin' thirty-thirty shell, Skeeter."

"No, I didn't, Sam," denied Skeeter. "I tried to, but the blamed extractor flung the shell through a crack in the porch floor, and I didn't have a chance to shoot twice."

"What did yuh have?" whispered Keenan.

"All I had was a rawhide honda, which I found at Fuzzy's spring, after the wires was torn loose. It's got a JG mark, done with a hot wire. That sounded like Johnny Greer, and that's all I had—except the knowledge that when a man's guilty, he'll fall for a lie, and you was guilty, Sam."

Skeeter Bill turned away. Fuzzy, Aunt Emma, Margie Edwards and her two children were talking excitedly.

Fuzzy said, "We'll have Hooty back here in two shakes, I tell yuh. You'll own the Tumblin' K, too. Whooee-ee! Ole Skeet shore mussed up that rat's nest in a hurry, didn't yuh, Skeet? I jist shook hands with Dan Houk. We was both so darned excited that we forgot to be enemies. He invited me to have a drink, but Emmy was listenin'. Well, darn yore long hide, why don'tcha say somethin'?"

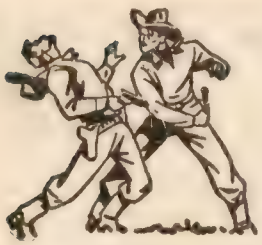
Skeeter Bill smiled slowly, his eyes shifting from face to face, until he was looking at young Bill Edwards, his blue eyes slightly red, cheeks just a trifle tear-stained. His eyes were just a bit wide, as he looked at Skeeter Bill.

Skeeter Bill said, very softly: "Happy Birthday, Bill!"

"It—sure—is," whispered young Bill, and Skeeter walked away, yanking his hat down over his eyes.

What a Tenderfoot!

By SIMPSON M. RITTER



WHEN Jeremiah MacAllister Partridge appeared in La Juanta about 1878 he looked and acted like a tenderfoot. His precise speech and exact table manners offended certain local lights. Max Heller, particularly, couldn't abide the Easterner. While the young man was traveling the countryside on business Heller entered his room and ripped up the Easterner's clothing.

The next morning Heller discovered that his room had been visited and considerable damage performed on his personal effects. He sought out the newcomer and prepared to thrash him. Big, confident, Heller half telegraphed his punch. Partridge took it on his right forearm instead of his chin and his left forced the bigger man's stomach inward almost to the spine. Heller stepped back and lashed out with a left. Partridge let it whistle past his right ear as he closed in with both arms flailing.

Heller went for his gun. He was noted for his fast draw. It was out and practically leveled when he found it kicked from his hand by his opponent's knee and the tenderfoot, for the first time really looking angry, coming at him with a leap that carried both men to the ground. Heller landed on his back and took the brunt of the blow, as intended. Partridge grasped the bully's hair with one hand and with his other fist pumped vibrating blows into the bristly face.

"All right, all right," whined Heller. "I've had enough. Let me up."

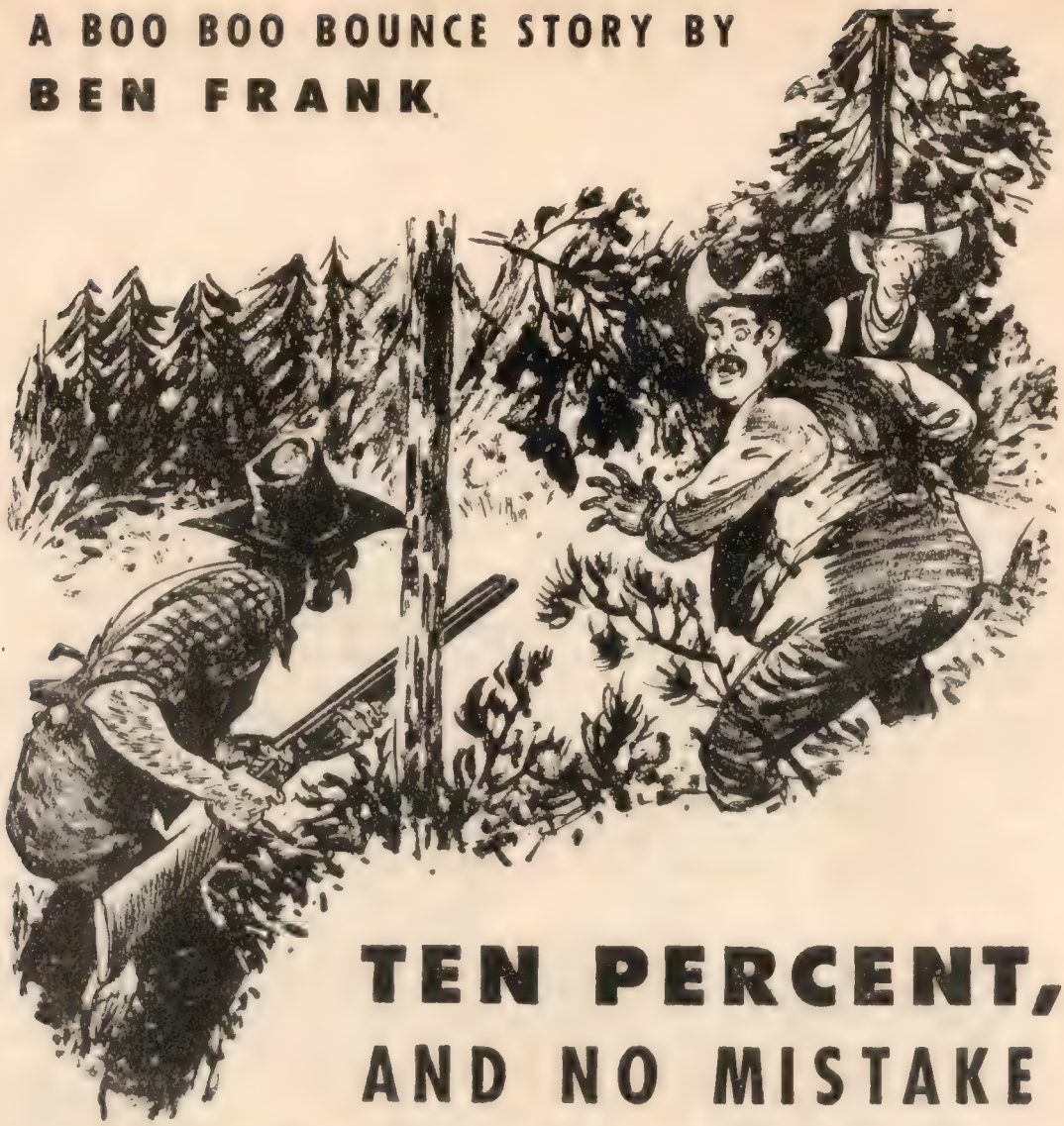
"And so, I imagine," said Partridge, "has this town. Get out in twenty-four hours and stay out. If you're here tomorrow I'll call on you and every day that you're here."

Heller got.

Partridge stayed on. The sheriff disclosed that the tenderfoot was his new deputy secretly imported to rid the town of Heller and others like him.

Heller should have investigated Partridge more closely before starting on him. He might not have discovered that he was the new deputy but he might easily have learned that Partridge was not only a former United States Army officer but an amateur boxer of some reputation.

A BOO BOO BOUNCE STORY BY
BEN FRANK



TEN PERCENT, AND NO MISTAKE

The deputy sheriff of Coyote County discovers that a ten-dollar bill can stretch plumb far when it's coaxed!

HAVING et my dinner, I am about to go back to the jail office, me being none other than the deputy sheriff of Coyote County U.S.A., when my wife reaches into the cooky jar and pulls out a ten-dollar bill.

"Hopewell," she says, "stop by the dress shop and leave this money which is for a dress I bought myself yesterday."

I take the ten-spot and feel a slight tremor move through me. It has been no little time, and then some, since I have thusly held so much dinerc in my fingers, and I recall how I owe "Forty-rod" Frye and "Ton-thumb" Tucker each a sawbuck and that they have been pressing me for payment, and no mistake.

My wife notices this tremor I have.

"Hopewell," she says business-like, "do not get no funny ideas about that tenner. Should you fail to pay it to the dress shop, I will lose my temper indeed!"

"My dear," I say hurt, "don't you trust your husband?"

"No!" she says, and slams the door out of which I have just went, so hard it likes to knock off my hat.

I put the sawbuck into a pocket and wander along the one street of Polecat, thinking how utmostly awkward it is to be married to a dear wife who is stingy with your money so much that you have to borrow here and yon for beers and such until you are in the red twenty smackeroos to two gents who lose their patience after some six-odd months of not being paid back.

While thinking thusly, who should I meet but a bow-legged hombre by the name of "Springtime" Springer. Now Springtime is nothing more than a saddle bum who wanders around and about, working as little as possible and coming to Polecat once each year in the spring, which it is now, to visit relatives and pick up a few free meals until he is invited to move elsewhere.

"Hopewell," he says, smiling very dapper, "yuh're indeed a sight for sore eyes. How is everything, includin' the little woman, and I know yuh will loan me ten bucks, which I will repay immediate upon closin' a deal I have in mind."

Now, loaning money to a gent like Springtime Springer is the same as throwing it in the creek. I shake my head somewhat feeble, for Springtime carries a long-barreled Colt which he is now fingering lovely.

"Springtime," I say, "I am sorry that I do not own such a handsome sum."

A LOOK of great sadness comes to his whiskery face, and he no longer looks so glad to see me.

"Hopewell," he says, "I am in dire need of this money. Are yuh positive yuh do not have ten dollars?"

I think of the ten in my pocket and feel my throat go dry, for I am not one to be untruthful to a gent with a long-barreled Colt. Then I remember how my wife slammed the door, so I shake my head very brisk.

"Good-by, and it was nice to have saw you," I say.

I hurry away and am relieved that he does not follow me. In fact, he bow-legs it the other way, and I stop by the post office and fish out the ten-spot to make sure I still have it.

It is indeed a very handsome piece of paper with Alexander Hamilton giving me the eye very friendly, and I am about to put it back into the pocket when a bony hand reaches over my shoulder, and Alex disappears amongst four bony fingers.

"Much obliged, Hopewell," a cracked voice says, and I find I am staring up into Forty-rod Frye's bleary eyes. "I had begun to think yuh never was goin' to pay me what I have loaned yuh previous."

"Forty-rod," I gasp, "kindly return that sawbuck, or—"

"Prattle-puttle!" he says, and walks away very brisk.

Feeling no little faint, I lean against the post office front, for I am now very far in the dog-house, and no mistake, without money to pay for my wife's new dress. Then I recall that only this morning, "Boo Boo" Bounce who, besides being my boss, is also sheriff of Coyote County, had two spare tens which he is saving for a rainy day. Now, Boo Boo is no hand to advance money to anybody, especially me, but I think that in a case like this he might be touched. So I hurry on toward the jail.

Just as I step around the corner of the jail building, who should I meet but Superstitious Snyder, a bony-faced stranger who has been in Polecat less than a week and is forever telling about the ghosts he has saw in his travels around and about the wide world.

"Hello, Hopewell," he says, smiling no little friendly. "By-the-by, how would yuh like to become a wealthy man?"

"Wealthy?" I say hoarse. "I will gladly settle for ten dollars and—"

He shakes his head sad. "Forget it,"

he says, and hurries away from me like I am a bad case of smallpox.

I tiptoe up the jail steps and go into the office very quiet, for this is Boo Boo's nap-time, and he does not like any sudden noises. But Boo Boo is not asleep this day. In fact, he is utmostly wide awake and is setting in his easy chair, blinking his eyes rapid and twiddling his fat thumbs very energetic.

"Boo Boo," I gasp, "what has gone and happened?"

He jumps slightly and turns so he can see me.

"Hopewell," he says, "never, never slip up on me like that! Incidental, I am about to become a millionaire."

"In that case," I say, "you will gladly loan me ten dollars to—"

He waggles a finger at me and shakes his head so violent his three chins quiver no little.

"No," he says, "but I will consider giving yuh a share of my gold."

"Gold?" I say no little astounded.

"Indeed, yes," he says, smiling very happy. "Deputy, I have got a map to the lost Lobo Mine!"

"No!" I exclaim.

"Yes. And in return for yore assistance, I will cut yuh in the tune of ten per cent."

He reaches into the drawer of his desk and comes up with a faded, yellowish paper, which he spreads out very careful.

IN ONE corner of this paper, I see the words "Lobo Lingo" and recall how many years ago a gent by the name of Lobo Lingo claimed he found a place where gold nuggets was thicker than fleas on a dog.

However, old Lobo never could find this place a second time because he lost the map, which he made, showing where at the mine was. Now, Lobo is long dead and the mine is still unfound. Personal, I have been inclined to doubt that there ever was a Lobo Mine.

So I say, "Boo Boo, I bet this map is a fake."

His face turns somewhat pinker than previous, and I realize I have said the wrong thing, but none-the-less, he lays a fat finger on a X on the map.

"This," he says, "is where at the Lost Lobo Mine is. Yuh will kindly observe it is located in—but never mind. Should I tell yuh more, yuh'd likely spill it, and we would have us a gold rush on our hands, which we utmostly do not want."

He folds the paper and puts it back into the drawer, which he locks secure.

"Of course, if yuh do not wish to become wealthy, Hopewell, I will find a man who—"

"Boo Boo," I say, "at the moment, all I need is ten dollars cash. If yuh would loan me ten of the twenty which—"

"I paid ten for the map," he says cold, "and I will need the remaining ten for supplies. Good-by, and kindly do not mention said map to any citizens."

"Leave us not rush me out of this ten per cent," I say hasty. "The map is on the level?"

"Of course, it's on the level," he says. "Do yuh think I am one to toss ten ringers into thin air?"

Then he explains how it is that Superstitious Snyder found this map in a old tin can buried under a flat rock when he was looking for fishworms, and how Superstitious himself started to look for the lost mine, but one night what should he see but old Lobo Lingo's ghost following him. Now, Superstitious is not one to fool around with a ghost, so he comes to Polecat, and after studying the various citizens around and about, choses Boo Boo as the man he can trust to buy the map for ten dollars cash and a promise of ten per cent of the gold.

"Well," I say, "leave us get the gold pronto, and with my ten per cent I will pay back the ten dollars."

"It is not so easy as that," Boo Boo says, shaking his head. "In the first place, it may take some time to find the mine for some of the landmarks may be gone by now. Also, we have got to have a excuse to leave town for a few days without nobody knowing why-for we are gone. Should it get rumored about that we are going for gold, there would be a stampede. Howsomever, once we stake out our claim, all will be duck

soup no little for us."

He taps his fat fingers on the desk very thoughtful.

"We must make it look like official business has took us out of town," he goes on. "Think of something, Hopewell."

I set down and think. I can see only one way for us to get out of town unsuspected. Especially by my wife.

"Boo Boo," I say, "for the good of the cause, I will risk all. Tonight I will slip out of the house and commit a crime, such as busting into some place. In the morning, we will have a excuse to leave town in search of the breaker-inner, who nobody will suspect is I."

He smiles very handsome and holds out his hand.

"Shake, Deputy. I am utmostly proud of yuh."

We shake hands very solemn. Then he pulls his last tenspot from a vest pocket and hands it to me.

"Deputy, whilst I am studying the map, kindly run acrost to Nail-head Nutter's store and buy us ten ringers' worth of provisions for said expedition."

Feeling the ten in my fingers, I remember my wife's new dress, but I am not one to be tempted on first thought. So I cross the street to Nail-head's store and step inside.

THERE comes a bellow that makes the windows rattle. This bellow sounds like "chicky-choo-oo" and is nothing more or less than "Chicky-choo" Crump sneezing as usual, and I see he has come in from his homestead and is buying a gunny-sack full of grub.

"My, my," I say pleasant, "you are really going to eat no little handsome at your place, Chicky-choo."

He gives me a cold stare, slings the gunny-sack over a shoulder and walks out.

"What is the matter with him?" I ask Nail-head.

He shakes his head. "Dunno. He acts like as if he is afraid to talk, which ain't like him."

I happen to glance across the street and see the dress shop, and this gives me a second thought about Boo Boo's money.

"Nail-head," I murmur, "how is Boo Boo Bounce's credit?"

"Fine up to, say, ten dollars," he says.

"That is good," I say, "for he sent me to buy ten dollars' worth of groceries on credit."

A few minutes later, I walk out of the store with both the groceries and the ten smackeroos, which I consider only a small loan from Boo Boo and will repay same as soon as I get my ten per cent.

On the street, I stop and fish out the ten-spot and fold it neat and am about to tuck it deep in a inside pocket when who would step up but Ton-thumb Tucker. He is the butcher, and is so called Ton-thumb on account it is estimated that he has added a good ton of weight with his thumb to the various cuts of meats he has sold. Recalling how I owe him ten dollars, I make haste to hide the sawbuck, but it slips from my fingers and flutters to the ground very plain to be seen.

"Ah, ha!" Ton-thumb says, scooping up the money. "Thanks no little, Hopewell, for paying yore debt."

"Ton-thumb," I say hoarse, "that is my wife's—"

"What is the wife's is the husband's, and visa visa," he says, and goes on to his butcher shop.

In spite of the weakness that has settled in my knees, I go on to the jail. Boo Boo smiles very wide at me.

"Deputy," he says, "with my gold I am going to have apple pie with cream every morning for breakfast."

"Me," I say somewhat feeble, "will use the first twenty dollars I get to pay off my debts."

But Boo Boo does not seem to hear me. He shuts his eyes, and on his fat face comes a expression you would expect to see on a little boy's face who is setting on Santa Claus' lap.

That same evening while I am eating supper, my wife says, "Hopewell, did you pay the dress shop the ten dollars?"

"Naturally," I answer, looking her very direct in the eye.

She does not question me further, for

at that moment, Grandma Grinder from across the street drops in to gossip, and for once I am glad there is such a thing as a woman's tongue.

I go to bed early and lay there in the dark with my eyes shut, waiting for my wife to go to bed so's I can sneak out to commit a crime, for she is a very sound sleeper, and once in bed and asleep, she is out for good and all until daylight.

The next thing I know, it is morning with the sun peeping in a window, and I am still in bed, while my wife is getting breakfast, and I have committed no crime indeed.

Boo Boo will not like this, I think.

And then I remember how I have not paid the dress shop and have charged the groceries up to Boo Boo. Just as the sweat begins to work out on my face from worry, there comes a fierce banging on the front door.

"Deputy," I hear Boo Boo yell, "trouble is a-foot!"

I begin to feel somewhat faint. Boo Boo, I figure, has jumped to conclusions about me committing a crime and will be no little put-out when he learns otherwise. Half dressed, I hurry to the door, and there is Boo Boo, and with him is "Jigger" Joe, who owns the Polecat Emporium, and Jigger Joe is tearing his hair and swearing with gusto.

"Somebody busted a back window of my saloon," he says, "and stole right at three hundert dollars from the cash drawer!"

BOO BOO gives me a sly wink, and I realize he thinks it is I who robbed the cash drawer, and I grow somewhat fainter.

"Deputy," Boo Boo says, "signs show that this desperado has rid out of town. We must saddle up and follow, pronto!"

"I don't see how yuh can tell he rid out of town," Jigger Joe frowns.

Boo Boo smiles at him fatherly.

"Jigger, us lawmen are trained to read signs that the ordinary hombre cannot see. Come, Hopewell, leave us hurry!"

"Hopewell ain't et," my wife says.

The way I feel, I know I cannot swallow one single bite of nothing, so I say, "Duty before food, my dear," and grab my hat and follow Boo Boo and Jigger down the street to the stable behind the jail.

Jigger watches us saddle our hosses.

"I hope yuh two jaspers ain't just puttin' on a act," he says skeptical. "If I don't get back my three—"

"Never fear, friend," Boo Boo says. "Us lawmen know this criminal business from A to Z."

"I notice," Jigger says dry, "that neither of yuh has got a gun. How can yuh catch a owlhooter without artillery?"

"Deputy," Boo Boo roars, "do not stand there doing positively nothing. Trot into the jail and bring me my forty-four. Also, do not forget yore shotgun."

"Oh, oh," I say. "I have loaned my shotgun to—"

"Never mind," he smiles. "With my trusty forty-four in hand, yore shotgun would be only superfluous baggage."

"What is all that stuff yuh got tied behind yore saddles?" Jigger wants to know.

"Grub," Boo Boo says. "Hopewell and me are allus ready to take up the trail of the lawless for days at a time."

I rush into the jail office and dig Boo Boo's forty-four from the desk drawer where he keeps it unloaded, him being no little gun-shy. Also, I get a box of shells, for I realize that even if Boo Boo don't know it, we have got us a real criminal on our hands. Outside, I hand both gun and shells to him. He buckles the gun about his oversized middle, but gives the shells back to me, him being no little fearful of live ammunition.

"Give me a boost, deputy," he says, and I do so.

In no time a-tall, we are clattering out of Polecat very brisk and heading straight for the mountains.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says fondly, "I am right proud of the neat way yuh busted into Jigger's saloon last night. Without doubt, yuh are the smartest deputy in the U.S.A. How-some-ever, it was not hardly necessary for yuh to take the three hundred cash. Just a ten

or so would have been okay."

I am about to tell him I did not rob the Emporium, but at the mention of "ten" I remember that I have not paid for my wife's dress. Also, I recall I have charged the groceries to Boo Boo. It comes to me then that should Boo Boo learn the truth about the robbery, he will likely call off looking for the lost Lobo Mine at the present, thusly making it impossible for me to get my ten per cent. This is when I decide to wait until we have the mine before telling him I did not break into Jigger's Emporium.

"I hope yuh have hid the three hundred in a safe place," he goes on blissful. "As soon as we stake out our claim, we will return to Jigger his money and say that when we caught up with the outlaw, he dropped the money and escaped."

"Where at is this lost mine?" I ask, changing the subject to things more pleasant.

"In the far end of Dead Man's Canyon," he answers. "We should ought to get there by midnight. There will be a full moon to help us. By morning, we should have our claim staked out and be ready to ride homeward."

We ride on in silence, me thinking of how I will pay the dress shop and Nailhead out of my ten per cent, and Boo Boo likely thinking of apple pie every morning for breakfast. By and by, we ride into the mountains. About midafternoon, we come to Dead Man's Canyon and take the narrow trail that leads into it. I see several hoss tracks and point out the same to Boo Boo.

"Likely some cowboys lookin' for strays," he says.

ONCE in the canyon, we follow a twisting stream westward toward the far end of the canyon. There are many tall pines and numerous boulders around and about, so the sun does not hardly get to us. It is very dreary and lonesome, and I find myself looking back to see if the ghost of old Lobo Lingo is following.

Sooner than you would think, it gets dark, but now there is less trees, and the moon comes up over the canyon rim very pretty, making it possible for us to see somewhat dim here and yon. At various times, I think I see the ghost of old Lobo Lingo, and my hair rises under my hat, but it is only the shadows I see until the time when we stop to rest our hosses. Then I see a movement, and a figure very black darts across a strip of moonlight and disappears in deep silence. Goose pimples break out on me no little.

"Did you see that man on a hoss?" I whisper to Boo Boo.

"No," he says. "And leave us not be seeing things that are not to be seen."

I say no more about ghosts, but wipe the sweat off my face. We mount and ride on into the night.

At last Boo Boo says, "Soon we should come to a ole cabin."

We round a tall boulder and behold a cabin in a weed-choked clearing with the moon very bright upon it.

"Now, to the right till we come to a lightnin' split pine," Boo Boo whispers hoarse.

We turn right, and sure enough, we come to a pine which is split very neat from top to bottom.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says excited, "luck is indeed with us. All the old landmarks are still standin'! Now, leave us dismount and pace off a distance of one hundred feet toward yon pinnacle which looks like a man's thumb sticking up."

We slide from our hosses and start walking through the brush when all at once we hear a very noisy noise.

"Don't move!" a voice says business like. "I got yuh two varmints covered!"

We do not move the slightest. A tall jasper steps out into the moonlight with a shotgun gleaming very wicked. This gent I do not recognize, but I have a feeling it would take little urging for him to leave us have a blast of buckshot.

"I hate thieves," he says raspy. "Especially pig-stealers. I am goin' to turn yuh over to the sheriff."

"I am the sheriff," Boo Boo says hoarse. "And this is my deputy. We are not stealing pigs, and no mistake! We are looking for a desperado who robbed

the Emporium in Polecat."

We show the jasper our badges, and he becomes somewhat mollified and ceases to point his shotgun at us.

"Sorry," he mumbles, "but there has been numerous persons snoopin' around and about my pigpen of late, so naturally I thought yuh two was doin' likewise."

We learn that he is a cowboy by the name of Bucko Bing and has recent swapped his hoss and saddle for the cabin and forty acres and some pigs to a gent who lived here previous.

"I got tired of punchin' cows," Bucko says, "so I decided now was a good time to settle down. How about yuh fellers comin' in for some coffee. I get kinda lonesome for somebody to gab to out here."

We follow Bucko into the cabin and he lights a lamp and puts the coffee on.

"Funny thing about this hombre I swapped my hoss to for this place," he says, poking at the fire. "Must've been a artist or somethin'. Left a lot of yellow sheets of paper and pencils and things. One of the sheets has got a drawin' on it. Sort of a map, but it don't make sense to me. I'll show yuh it."

He digs into a pile of old yellow papers and comes up with the drawing, which he spreads on the table. Boo Boo and me stare at it pop-eyed, for it is exactly like the map Boo Boo got from Superstitious Snyder for $10 and ten percent.

Bucko points to the X that marks the lost Lobo Mine. "What I don't understand," he begins, "is this here—"

FROM outside comes an unearthly roar that makes my skin crawl no little.

"What's that?" Boo Boo gurgles.

"We'll find out!" Bucko says gritty.

He grabs up his shotgun and heads through the door. Boo Boo and I follow close. The roar comes again, but this time I know what it is. It is Chicky-choo sneezing, and then I see him standing by the hoss at the lightning-split pine.

"Another pig swiper!" Bucko says, and aims his gun.

"Don't shoot!" Boo Boo says, and Bucko don't.

We round up Chicky-choo and all go back to the cabin. He explains very indignant that he is not trying to steal nobody's pigs, but that he is merely looking for a strayed cow. Then Chicky-choo sees the map on the table, and his eyes also bug, and then some.

"What's this?" he asks feeble.

"A map, I reckon," Bucko answers. "But as I was startin' to tell the sheriff, this X don't make sense exactly. Yuh see—"

He never tells what to see, for at this precise moment, a pig lets out a very high pitched squeal.

Cussing no little severe, Bucko grabs up the gun and leaps through the door. Us three follow close behind, and presently we come to a split-rail pigpen in a nearby hollow. There is a man standing with his hands on the top rail.

"Hist 'em!" Bucko shouts angry.

The man lifts his hands and turns quick, and I see he is nobody but Forty-rod Frye. We take him back with us to the cabin.

"Forty-rod," Boo Boo says severe, "have yuh turned to a pig rustler?"

"Prattle-puttle, no!" he says indignant. "I was ridin' through the canyon on my way to Dry Springs and kind of got lost. Just as I was studyin' which way to go, yuh jaspers rushed me, and I—"

His voice choked off, and his eyes blinked no little fast. He was staring at the map on the table.

"What's this?" he asked in his cracked voice.

"It was left here by the feller from who I traded for this cabin and the pigs," Bucko Bing explains. "Like I have been tryin' to tell the sheriff for the past half hour, this here X marks the place where at—"

A pig lets out a squeal, and Bucko grabs up the shotgun.

"This time for sure," he says, "I bet somebody is tryin' to snatch a pig off'n me."

He rushes out the door, the rest of us tagging along behind. We slip up toward the pigpen, and sure enough, there are two hombres in the middle of it, and the pigs are squealing like they

have got their tails in a wringer.

Bucko covers the two gents very neat with the shotgun, and bellows, "At last I have caught yuh, yuh blasted pig rustlers!"

"Why," Boo Boo murmurs, "them two gents are none other than Springtime Springer and Superstitious Snyder, both of who I know quite well."

Boo Boo is right. Springtime and Superstitious climb out of the pigpen, looking no little worried. Especially Superstitious Snyder.

"How come," Boo Boo asks cold, "is it that yuh two gents are around and about this time of night in a pigpen?"

Superstitious eyes Bucko's shotgun and swallows hard.

"Springtime forced me to come here," he says.

"Correct," Springtime says. "I did so because I did not entirely trust friend Superstitious, him being somewhat of a stranger. Leave us go into yon cabin where at there is a light, and I will explain precise."

We all go into the cabin with both Springtime and Bucko keeping an eye on Superstitious Snyder, who seems no little unhappy and wishes he was a thousand miles elsewhere, and no mistake.

WHEN we get inside, Springtime sees the map on the table, and his eyes stick out far enough to hang a hat over. "Where at did that map come from?" he asks fierce.

Bucko draws a breath and scratches his left ear.

"I have been tryin' to tell about this for some time, but something allus happens before I finish. I found this map mixed up with them ole yellow papers. It is a map of this end of the canyon, and that X marks where at my pigpen is located exactly. I don't understand why anybody would make a map to mark a pig—"

Springtime grabs Superstitious Snyder by the throat.

"Swindler!" he roars. "It is a good thing I didn't trust yuh, but made yuh come with me to look for the lost Lobo Mine. If I hadn't of, the ten dollars I give yuh for a map would be gone forever!"

"I might mention," Bucko says grim, "that this gent yuh are squeezin' so rough by the neck is the same gent who traded me this cabin and the pigs for my hoss, which I saw standin' by the pigpen."

But nobody is paying any mind to what Bucko Bing says. We are listening to Superstitious Snyder who is talking very fast indeed to keep from being choked to death by Springtime.

It comes out that Superstitious has made numerous fake maps while he resides here in the cabin and has sold them, not only to Boo Boo, but also to various citizens, including Forty-rod Frye, Chicky-choo Crump and Springtime Springer. All this is why so many gents have visited Bucko's pigpen of late.

Pronto, Forty-rod, Chicky-choo and Springtime want their money back and get it from Superstitious, all except Boo Boo. He says nothing about having been stuck for one of the maps. He merely looks pale and shakes his head until his three chins quiver no little, and then some.

As for me, knowing there will be no ten per cent, I feel all is lost, for I recall how I charged the groceries and did not pay for my wife's new dress.

Chicky-choo is the last to get his ten smackeroos back. Suddenly his nose begins to twitch, and he lets forth a "chicky-choo-oo!" that almost puts out the lamp.

"Come to think of it," he puffs, "this canyon is open range, so Superstitious didn't own this place a-tall. He has swindled yuh outa yore hoss, Bucko."

"No, he ain't!" Bucko says, and goes outside and rounds up his hoss and leads him back to the cabin.

By now day is breaking, and we see that Bucko's is indeed the very same black hoss that Superstitious rid into Polecat some few days ago, and also the same saddle and saddle-bag.

It is plain to be seen that Bucko is happy to get said animal back.

"I was fed up with pig raisin' anyway," he says.

This is when we notice that Superstitious Snyder has snook away from us and is gone, and Forty-rod allows it is good riddance. Then him and Springtime and Chicky-choo mount their own hosses and head back toward Polecat, leaving Boo Boo, Bucko and I standing by the cabin.

"Come, Deputy," Boo Boo says to me. "Leave us go look for the desperado who robbed the Emporium."

And he gives me a slight wink, which I do not return, for I feel new worries fall upon my shoulders.

After we are some distance from the cabin, I ask, "How come you did not get your sawbuck from Superstitious?"

"It would not do for the citizens to realize that their sheriff was took in by such a scheme," he says. "Howsomeever, we will now round up Superstitious and recover said money in private. Incidental, Hopewell, where did yuh hide the three hundred yuh took from the Emporium?"

This is when I tell him it was not I who did the robbing, but slept the long night through.

INSTANTANEOUS, the blood drains from his fat face. Then it comes back with a rush along with various cuss-words very fierce.

"Hopewell, yuh skunk!" he says hoarse. "Consider yoreself no longer the deputy sheriff of Coyote County. Also, consider yoreself in hot water very deep for suppressing information—"

"Shh!" I hiss. "Is that not Superstitious Snyder now crawling over yon ridge?"

It is none other than he, and we leave our hosses hid and also crawl over the ridge amongst the boulders and bushes. At the top of the ridge, we catch a glimpse of Superstitious sneaking around amongst some plum thickets very lovely with bloom.

"This is indeed peculiar funny," Boo Boo murmurs. "Yuh would think he'd get as far away as possible, and no mistake, instead of going back. Leave us follow the rat."

Which we do, not letting him see us. When we come to the edge of the clearing, we see Superstitious sneaking toward Bucko's hoss, which stands tied to a sapling in the shade of the cabin. Smoke is pouring from the chimney, and we catch a faint smell of bacon and coffee, which tells us Bucko is having one more meal in the cabin before moving elsewhere.

Just as Superstitious begins to untie Bucko's hoss, Boo Boo steps out and says, "Hold, yuh swindler!"

Superstitious whirls about, looking no little surprised. At this precise moment, Bucko Bing steps outside, scratching his left ear and looking about uncertain.

"What's a-goin' on, gents?" he asks.

"It appears," Boo Boo says, walking up to Superstitious very grim, "that this crook is about to steal yore hoss, and—"

That is as far as Boo Boo gets, for Superstitious hauls off and plants a hay-maker square in the middle of Boo Boo's stomach. Boo Boo lets out a groan and bends double. Superstitious reaches out and lifts Boo Boo's forty-four from the holster and levels it very business-like, and no mistake.

"Stand back, gents, and do not try to stop me," he says icy. "Although I have give up some nice sawbucks, I do not propose to part with the money I stole from the Emporium!"

Boo Boo, Bucko and me stand there, doing nothing, while Superstitious climbs into the saddle. Without lowering the forty-four he works his left hand inside the saddle-bag, and a satisfied smile comes over his bony face.

"Ah," he says, "the money ain't been touched. *Adios*, chums, and do not try to follow unless yuh want to get shot."

That is when I remember the box of cartridges in my pocket.

"Why," I say, "Boo Boo's gun is not loaded!"

Boo Boo blinks no little rapid. "Why, so it ain't!" he yells, and grabs Superstitious' left leg.

Both Bucko and I swarm upon the hoss and hold him very firm, while Superstitious tries to shoot the empty gun and kick his leg free, both of which he cannot do. Then Boo Boo pulls, and Superstitious comes out of the saddle and

hits the ground hard and tosses about most violent, but Boo Boo keeps a tight grip.

A piece of paper flutters from Superstitious' shirt pocket and falls near my feet. On this paper, I see a likeness of Alexander Hamilton and realize that here, without doubt, is Boo Boo's sawbuck.

A tremor runs through me, and the next thing I know, I have put my foot on Alex's face, thus hiding the bill very neat from all eyes. It is then that Superstitious Snyder gives up, and Boo Boo clicks handcuffs very tight about his wrists.

This same evening Boo Boo and I are setting in the jail office, with him looking no little pleased.

He says, "Deputy, carryin' a empty gun has its advantages, and no mistake. If my gun had of been loaded, we—"

He shudders. Then he leaps to his feet no little sudden.

"Hopewell," he says hoarse, "I plumb forgot about the ten ringers I paid for that fake map! It was not in the saddlebag, for in that was the precise amount that Jigger Joe lost from his cash drawer. And Superstitious did not have no extra tens on him after everybody who he sold maps to was repaid. Hopewell, what could of happened to my lovely ten—"

HE is interrupted by the door banging open, and in walks Jigger Joe with three ten-spots waving in his fist.

"Boys," he says, "I figure yuh deserve some reward for gettin' back my three hundert—say, about ten per cent. So here is three tenners."

"Thank yuh kindly," Boo Boo says, taking the three tens no little quick.

After Jigger has left, Boo Boo sets down very content.

"Deputy," he smiles, "leave us no longer worry about my lost sawbuck, for I have my money back plus ten ringers."

"Boo Boo," I say desperate, "do not forget it was I who remembered that your gun was empty. For this, I should be rewarded with no less than ten dollars."

"Tut, tut!" he says. "If yuh hadn't of thought of it, I would have."

Then I grin wicked, and say brittle, "You would not want me going around and about, telling the voters of Coyote County that yuh paid ten dollars for a fake map, would you? You wouldn't want a story like that accidentally to get in the *Polecat News*, would you?"

His chins quiver slightly, and his fat face grows pale. Slowly he peels off one of the tens and hands it to me.

"Deputy," he says, "kindly disregard my rough words to yuh a few hours previous. Also, good-by for today, and I will expect yuh back to work in the morning, for yuh are indeed a very fine deputy."

"Thank you," I say humble.

"And do not fret about not getting ten per cent of a million dollars or so," he goes on kindly, "but be happy with the ten smackeroos which yuh now hold in yore hand."

I am indeed happy, and no mistake.

I put on my hat and go home, not forgetting to stop on the way at Nail-head Nutter's store to pay for the groceries, and also at the dress shop I pause a moment to leave the sawbuck which dropped from Superstitious' shirt pocket and over which I put my foot, thusly paying for my wife's new dress.

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

VACATION AND NO MISTAKE

Another Uproarious Boo Boo Bounce Yarn

By BEN FRANK

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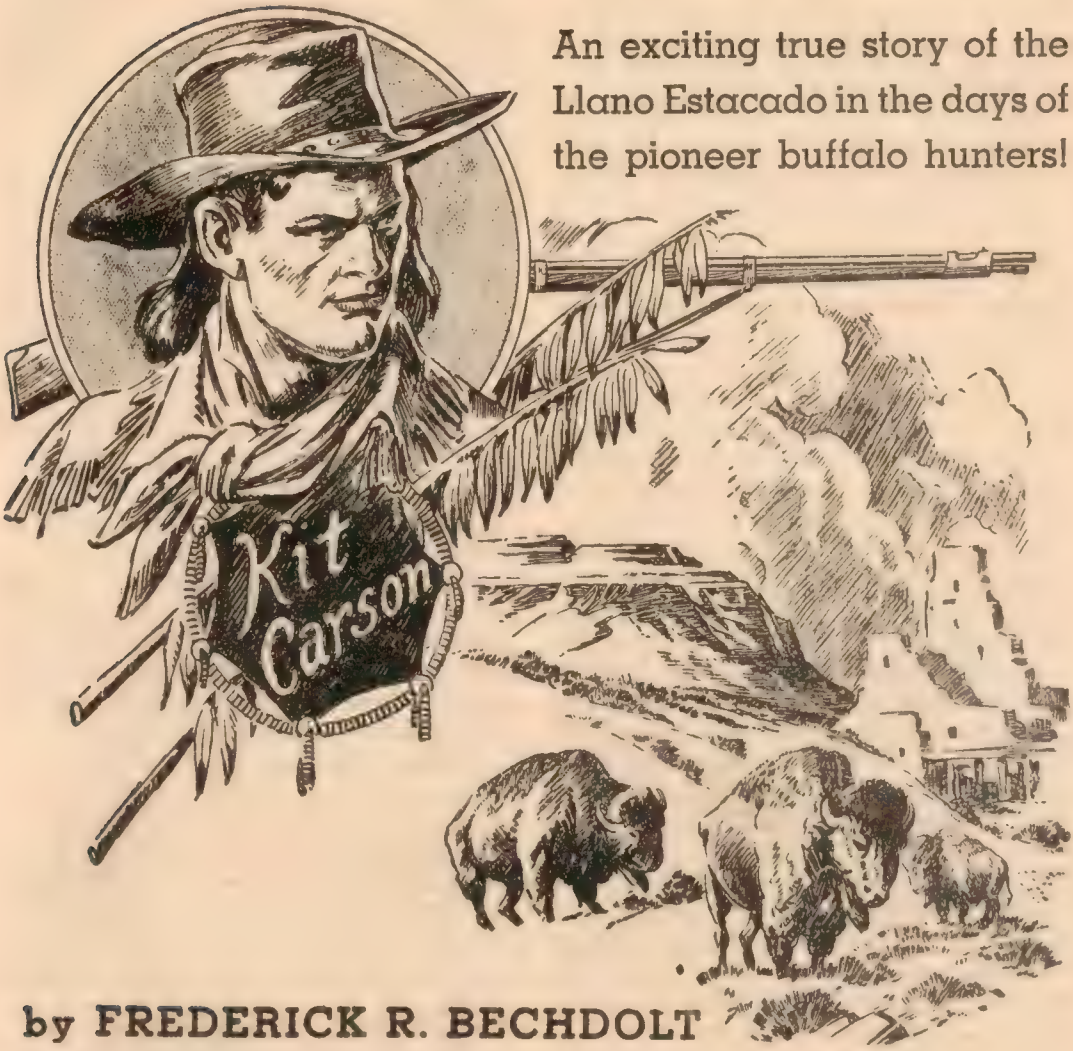
PLUS MANY OTHER TOP-FLIGHT STORIES AND FEATURES

ADOBE WALLS

An exciting true story of the Llano Estacado in the days of the pioneer buffalo hunters!



by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

THE man for whom Bent's Creek was named is almost forgotten. So are the men who died fighting within sight of the walls a mile or two from where Bent's Creek empties into the Canadian in the Texas Panhandle.

Orchards, alfalfa-fields, and farmhouses have long since taken the place of wild grasses and timber, until the original setting has vanished almost as completely as the walls of gray adobe. But the hills still stand, and tablelands which stretch southward to the enormous mesa known as the Llano Estacado.

In the days of free grass, when cattle kings succeeded the Comanches who had been the red lords of the Llano and the adjacent ranges, the story of the adobe walls, of the flat where dead men lay in unmarked graves, was told by sunburned young riders on the range, and in Tascosa's roaring dance-halls. Old-timers heard it from buffalo hunters in

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Mobeetie and Fort Griffin. The tale in its entirety made a bold pageant.

When bearded trappers, in moccasins and fringed buckskin roamed the Rocky Mountain country from the Colorado to the Yellowstone, Bent's Fort stood near what is now the city of Las Animas, Colorado. In the west, the peaks that part the waters of the continent stood out against the skyline; eastward, the land rolled away to the wide prairies. Before the heavy portals that gave entrance to the thick-bastioned adobe walls, a long road wound into the southwest. Here covered wagons which had traveled from the Mississippi began the last leg of their journey to Santa Fe, where Colonel William Bent's two brothers and Ceran St. Vrain, his other partner, lived within the fort they had founded as a trading post.

Red men of many nations gathered there to camp outside the fort and barter pelts of beaver, mink, and muskrat for beads, lead, powder, calico, and gewgaws which Colonel Bent's wagon trains brought from St. Louis. They came by the hundreds until the open space before the walls was dotted with their peaked lodges.

In the spring white trappers came from distant streams and mountain meadows, to dispose of their season's catch, to dance in the low-ceilinged room, to drink strong wheat whisky from Taos, and brandy from beyond the Mississippi—and sometimes to fight grim deadly duels with knives or pistols. Every day of the year were to be found here those grizzled, leathern-cheeked rovers who found the passes across the Western mountains and made the first rude maps of the larger rivers—the pathfinders.

Bent's Fort was the most famous of the outposts of the American Fur Company in the West.

And of the men who built those stations Colonel Bent was rated the shrewdest. He held the commerce of a wild country which now comprises several great States, and his name was known everywhere, even in the smoky lodges of the red men. Still he was not satisfied, because far to the southeast, where the Comanches roamed and raided. Red lords of the Llano Estacado, they traded their rich loot only with the swarthy traders from Taos and Santa Fe who came to meet them on the banks of the Canadian—the *Comancheros*, as men called them.

Every year these venturers fared forth from the Spanish settlements of New Mexico with their two-wheeled ox-carts, and the traffic grew so rich that Colonel Bent thought it worth his while to try to divert it to the fort. The Comanches were willing; so were their allies, the Kiowas, who paid several visits to the trading post. But the bold Cheyennes with whom they were at war made things so unpleasant that the expeditions ceased. And Colonel Bent saw some of the most profitable commerce of the prairies go back into the hands of the New Mexicans.

He discussed the matter with such rovers as old Bill Williams, Jim Bridger, and the mulatto, James P. Beckwourth, who had spent years dealing with the Indians. He decided to build a branch trading post on the banks of the Canadian, right in the country of the Kiowas and Comanches.

Land of the Comanches

One day a file of horsemen and pack-animals passed from the gates of the stockade and lined out into the east. Of the riders a number were Mexicans, wearing steeple-crowned sombreros and leathern-strapped, wide-mouthed trousers. There were five Americans, clad in buckskin, with powder-horns slung by their sides, and long-barreled, muzzle-loading rifles across their saddle-bows.

The lank hair of two of these was shot with gray; the lines were deepening in their sunburned faces. They had been with the firm of Bent & Company when they had built the first picket stockade further up the Arkansas, and their business had taken them far beyond old Santa Fe, to the Jornada del Muerto, over the Rio Grande, into remote Chihuahua.

Jim Murray, the leader of this expedition, was one of them; and the name

of the other was Fisher. Behind them rode "Uncle John" Smith, a man of thirty who was as powerful among the Cheyennes as one of their own chiefs. A young hunter for the fort who was already beginning to make a reputation as an Indian fighter came next. "Kit" Carson was his name. And with him rode his friend Lucien Maxwell, who became famous when he obtained the great Maxwell Grant.

Traveling eastward, they passed the mouth of the Purgatoire River and went on beyond Choteau's Island. Near the southwestern corner of what is now Kansas they left the wagon tracks, and before long forded the Cimarron, the stream where quicksands and sudden freshets were to claim many a bold horseman during the next five decades. Following the river they crossed the Santa Fe Trail and struck off into an untracked wilderness, picking their course by such landmarks as John Smith had learned from the Cheyennes. Their long-barreled rifles furnished them with meat from herds of lumbering buffalo and swift bands of antelope. Always they kept a keen lookout for Indians.

When they had followed a tributary of the Canadian's south fork to its mouth they were in the land of the Comanches. Beyond the bluffs which lined the valley, lay the country of the Kiowas. The trails of the Apaches were visible at the creek crossings.

Virgin Territory

Finally they struck the clear-watered creek which now bears Colonel Bent's name. And when they saw the wide bottomland where grass was lush, they said, "Here is a good camping ground."

Deciding to build the trading post here, they set the Mexicans to work the next day. Within a week the first long rows of adobe bricks were drying in the hot summer sunshine. Soon the adobe walls began to rise on the flat. Before the first leaves were turning yellow in the thickets the first building raised by white men in the Texas Panhandle had been erected. Within were sheds to house the goods the pack-animals had brought, living quarters, and a great corral for the stock between sunset and sunrise.

The Comanches came from the Llano Estacado, hesitant in their approach. But when one of the traders advanced with his hand upraised in the peace sign, the chief rode forward to meet him. They were willing to talk things over. So the pipes were brought out. The leaders of both parties squatted in a circle, each taking his puff in turn, and there was much slow conversation. When an understanding of the purposes of the expedition had been arrived at, bartering began. Before snow flew the little company from Bent's Fort departed, driving before them the mules and ponies that they had acquired, and which later were sold in the Missouri markets for good prices.

When spring came, they were back again. The Comanches brought to Bent's Creek the loot of their raids beyond the Rio Grande, and stock no doubt from Texas farms on the Trinity, the Brazos, and the Nueces. By day a Mexican herder tended the growing band. At night they were locked within the adobe walls.

The summer passed. There was rich trade, and no trouble.

Marooned Among Hostiles

Jim Murray, Fisher, John Smith, Kit Carson, and Lucien Maxwell returned with the advent of the third spring. This time there were only two Mexicans, the day herder and the cook.

One day when the Mexican herder was dozing in the saddle, a band of Jicarilla Apaches came stealing through the thickets, crawling through the high grass, camouflaged by earth and herbage until their bare bodies seemed part of the land. The sentry at the fort had no suspicion of anything wrong until he slid from his pony, dying, with half a dozen arrows in his body, and the stampeded herd was being driven on a dead run toward the bluffs.

The six men left at the fort were afoot. All that summer's accumulated wealth had vanished in a rattle of hoofs and a swirl of dust. The white men were

marooned, a hundred and fifty miles away from any of their own race, right in the heart of the Indian country.

One thing was clear—the longer they waited, the worse would be their plight. The loot within these adobe walls would draw the tribes from all directions. Once signal smokes began to rise, a red circle would form, drawing in tighter day by day. If the white traders wanted to see Bent's Fort again, they had to strike out at once.

Within the gates were three decrepit mules. These were loaded with food and ammunition. The rest of the goods was cached after the fashion which French Canadian trappers had introduced into the country. A great hole was lined with buffalo hides, and when it was filled with stores, it was so skilfully covered that the spot could not be distinguished.

They set forth when night came on, with Murray in command. They did not take the trail toward the mouth of the Cimarron but picked a course by the stars across the country. They muffled the hoofs of the pack-animals in sacks, and did no talking. No man was allowed to strike a light; there was no smoking.

Indian Attack!

So they stole across the flat, climbed the low bluffs, and came out on the uplands where the rocks were knifelike and cactus grew among the brush. There was no moon. Landmarks were invisible, and they could barely distinguish one another's forms. Prickly pear and cat's claw tore their garments. Their moccasins were shredded, their feet were bleeding, but they pressed on, dumb as the shadows. The eastern sky began to brighten and turn a faint pink. Then as the sun rose they saw a cluster of moving dots afar off.

"Indians," said one of the traders.

Another pointed grimly. The dots were coming toward them, but there was a chance that the savages had not seen them, since the approach was slow. The white men were looking about for shelter when Jim Murray called:

"Here they come, boys! Bunch up them mules!" He ordered the Mexican cook to hold the three animals. "The rest of you scatter out!"

He and the old timer, Fisher, dropped flat in the short buffalo grass and looked to the priming of their rifles.

The band on the racing ponies drew nearer. There were more than fifty of them, Kiowas, their bare bodies daubed with paint. A tall chief in the lead wore a great war-bonnet with trailing plumes. The drumming of ponies' hoofs and shrill war-yells came down the wind.

Smoke-wreaths floated away from the two muzzles of the guns in the hands of Murray and Fisher. The naked body of the chief pitched from his pony's bare back. The charge wavered, as the white men reloaded.

The Indians went sweeping by, sending a cloud of arrows. But before the last had buried itself in the dry turf the yelling pack had drawn well out of range.

In moments they came on again until the foremost ranks were so close the warrior's faces could be seen. The rifles began barking, and four more riders fell. A fifth lay pinned beneath his dying pony. The charge broke.

There was no further attack. The band had drawn away for good.

"We'll shove on now," Murray said.

Kit Carson to the Rescue

They reached water some hours later and rested until night, when they resumed their journey. It was many days before they brought the news of what had happened to the fort on the upper Arkansas. Colonel Bent sent an expedition to recover the goods, but the Indians had burned everything until only the walls remained. The cache had been looted. No attempt was ever made to reoccupy the place.

As the years went by, the adobe walls began to crumble. What had been a fort became lines of gray mud, in places barely more than waist-high. The Texans had organized their Rangers. The Comanches were falling back before them and their forays were becoming less extensive. They were forsaking the richer prairies for the arid

Llano Estacado. Here they made their stand, and even the coming of the stage-line which crossed a corner of the great mesa could not dislodge them. Game was as plentiful as ever, and before the steady march of civilization the great mesa remained a Comanche stronghold.

During the Civil War, the plains tribes made a truce among themselves and went on the warpath to drive the white men from the West. The Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Comanches, and Kiowas swept over the country. They massacred teamsters; destroyed wagon trains; and for a time this link of communication between the Union and New Mexico was cut. Kit Carson, with his wisdom in Indian fighting, was given command of a regiment of New Mexico volunteer cavalry, to clean out the war parties.

In the summer of 1865 his scouts brought him word at Fort Union of a band of Kiowas and Comanches encamped along the Canadian, and he took four hundred horsemen out to find them. When they reached the bluffs overlooking Bent's Creek, they saw a village of a hundred and fifty lodges near the adobe walls which Carson and his companions had abandoned nearly thirty years before.

He gave the orders to his men to charge. The men spurred their horses to a dead run, but before they had crossed the flat the warriors were ready for them, and so stubborn was their stand that the battle lasted until late in the afternoon. Then the red men broke and fled, but more than sixty of them were cut down as they made for bluffs.

The grass of the next spring hid the last evidences of the bloodshed. But as the years went by the Comanches still roamed over the Llano Estacado as they had roamed since the memory of man, the red lords of an arid wilderness. . . .

Along the Santa Fe Trail

In 1874 the old Santa Fe Trail was a well-beaten road. Every few miles, all the way from Dodge City to the Colorado boundary, it came within sight of the newly built railway. In places the Arkansas River's windings were betrayed by a dark line of brush and timber in the south. Beyond those thickets lay the domain of the Indians. No white hunter might enter it with impunity.

The herds of buffalo which grazed from here to the Rio Grande belonged to the Cheyennes, the Arapahoes, the Apaches, the Kiowas, and the Comanches. So said the Medicine Lodge treaty of 1867, and patrolling troops saw to it that the provisions were enforced. But save for this one provision, both Washington and the red men ignored the compact utterly.

The first raw winds of spring were sweeping the prairies of southwestern Kansas. On those windy days of early March the traffic of the rutted old highway was picking up. Wagons were rumbling eastward, and horsemen passed every day. Buffalo hunters were drifting into Dodge from their lonely dugouts and cabins on the Kansas plains and beyond the Colorado boundary. They were big, rugged men who wore their hair to their shoulders. Their limp-rimmed, low-crowned sombreros seemed to be the universal head-gear. They also favored fringed buckskin shirts and vari-colored mackinaws. All carried long-barreled single-shot Sharp's fifties. To an extent, they were men of property, for they owned their wagons and outfits, and the skinners and cooks with them were their employees.

Hunting was business with these men. They were experts at marksmanship and stalking. Upon their skill with the big-caliber rifles depended their profits or losses. So many hides, so many dollars.

As they drifted into the young town this year the outlook was not promising. Ever since the railroad's construction, the number of buffalo hunters had been increasing, and the herds which men had said were beyond extermination were vanishing from north of the timber beyond the upper Arkansas.

Dodge City Doings

Dodge City in those days marked the

real terminus of the railroad, although tracks had been built to Canada at the Colorado boundary. The buffalo hunters this year had preceded the cowboys and the trail herds and the cold-eyed gunmen. But the little town of unpainted pine buildings was enjoying a brisk prosperity. Teamsters and construction hands, booted freighters and troopers from the military post, crowded one another on the narrow sidewalks and mingled in the noisy barrooms, drinking, gambling, dancing. The buffalo hunters joined in the festivities. They roistered through the long nights to the whining of the fiddles; they drank the stinging whisky; they tried their luck at faro and stud and monte. After the long winter's loneliness, they had their playtime. Then when their blood had cooled a bit, they sought the outfitting stores, thinking about the coming season's business.

One day a number of them were in the store of Leonard & Myers. The counters were heaped high with heavy blue flannel shirts, mackinaws, slickers, and thick blankets. Rifles stood racked in a long row—Winchesters and Sharps and Remingtons. The rafters were hung with tinware. The odor of oiled leather mingled with the smells of soap and coffee, salt meat and brown sugar.

The hunters were lounging around the stove, for the prairie wind was raw. The talk had simmered down to what was uppermost in every hunter's mind —the next season's herd. Each new arrival brought the same report. Where the prairies once had been covered with bison only scattered bands had been found last season.

There was no use talking, it was agreed. The harvest was over.

"North of the Arkansas," commented Myers, nodding as he came from behind the counter.

"And in the country south?" asked a man, derision in his voice as though to suggest that all men would know that to be beyond possibility.

"Ask Billy Dixon," A. C. Myers, an old hunter himself, answered quietly, and all eyes turned to a quiet young fellow whose dark hair hung to his shoulders. So far he had been saying little, as though with him silence had become a habit.

"He's back last month from a trip as far as the South Fork of the Canadian—went down to Red River," Myers added. "Tell 'em, Billy."

Follow the Buffalo

Dixon, later famous as a scout and plainsman, told them how he and three other men had scouted through the forbidden country below the Arkansas; how in the regions bordering the northern edge of the Llano Estacado they had found evidence of enormous herds, as great as those which once had covered the Kansas prairies.

"I'm going to strike out when the grass comes," he finished.

These men were old hunters, men who had come into the territory when the Indians were on the warpath. They were not bothered by the presence of troops along the Arkansas, nor by the hostility of the Kiowas, the Apaches, and the Comanches who held that land to be theirs. Dodging cavalry was easy; Indian fighting was part of the day's work. What did bother these men was the remoteness of the region from a market.

"Where we goin' to haul our hides?" a hunter demanded. "Dodge is too fur away."

"If they's enough of you boys go down there," Myers said, "I'll build a tradin' store. Yuh can freight my goods in yore wagons. I'll pay for it. And I'll sell to yuh at Dodge City prices."

That settled it. Plans were made for the coming summer. Others joined the venture, among them James Hanrahan, an old-timer who brought, in addition to his hunting outfit, a stock of whisky and some saloon fixtures. Thomas O'Keefe went along to establish a blacksmith shop. Rath & Wright, like Leonard & Myers, were taking along a stock of general merchandise.

The train of wagons struck off across the Arkansas, flanked by horsemen with long-barreled buffalo-guns across their saddle-bows.

Men who have written of the hide-hunters nearly always have decried them and their calling. But the extermination of the bison was a necessary step toward the conquest of the wilderness. So long as the herds existed the Indians roamed where they willed. Until buffalo vanished from the prairies there was no range for cattle. There was no chance for farms, for no fence could stand before them.

The Town of Adobe Walls

Civilization was moving toward the setting sun, and the hide-hunters helped to clear the way for it. These half a hundred men who were traveling toward the edges of the Llano Estacado were unconsciously playing a big part in the bold drama, the Winning of the West.

Among them were veterans of the Civil War, plainsmen who had hunted and scouted and fought Indians from the Yellowstone to the Rio Grande, and many men still in their twenties. Beyond looking out for their scalps they had no cares. In camp at night they sang and lied and frolicked by the fire.

When they left the rolling prairies of what now is Oklahoma behind them, they followed the course of the Canadian River, and when the sun was growing warmer and the feed was getting tall in the creek bottoms they reached the tributary labeled Adobe Walls Creek on the map of the Panhandle. Here, within sight of the flat by Bent's Creek where the long low mounds of gray mud were melting to the earth, they halted and began building.

In a few weeks a town they called Adobe Walls had grown up in the bottomland: Rath & Wright's store, Hanrahan's saloon, O'Keefe's blacksmith shop, the Leonard & Myers establishment, and a picket corral. Dodge City, the nearest settlement, was more than a hundred and fifty miles to the north. But the trail the hunters had broken was already being beaten down by others. New outfits came.

As the days grew warmer, the hunters began to depart. Their wagons rumbled across the bottomland and up the bluffs.

Weeks went by, then wagons were returning, laden with green hides. The owners bought new supplies, and told of the great herd that had come out of the south, of enormous slaughter.

Good Hunting

The big Sharps rifles were booming from sunrise to sunset. The hunters lay in the grass resting their heavy weapons on crotched sticks, picking off the leaders of the milling herds. When the whole mass was milling, the hunter continued lining his sights to kill at the instant of its impact, for a wounded brute meant a stampede.

June was well along when one day a wagon came rattling into Adobe Walls. The driver pulled up the lathered horses. He shouted one word:

"Indians!"

A crowd quickly gathered around him. His camp, he said, was on Chicken Creek, and he'd had two partners. The day before, he had driven back from Adobe Walls with fresh supplies, to find the camp looted and the bodies of his companions pegged out, as the skinners peg out the green hides.

Within a week another hunter came in with the news that a war-party had stolen up on his camp near Red River.

"Got both my skinners," said he. "I found the bodies in the crick bottom." He added gruesome details.

Every hunter who was in town hurried to his camp to bring back his companions. Twenty-eight men waited in Adobe Walls for five days for more news. None came. The scare was over. On the twenty-sixth day of June they prepared to set forth to the hunting-grounds again. The merchants did a brisk business. Then, the wagons loaded, every man repaired to Hanrahan's saloon to line up before the unpainted pine bar.

The Indians had gone. They were right about that. The roving Kiowas who had slain the four victims were well on their way to the north. But their brief raid served to bring together in

this spot a score of the deadliest shots in all the West. Still, no one knew—then—how Quanah Parker, head chief of the Quahada Comanches, had stirred his nation, the Kiowas, and the Cheyennes to go on the war-path; how they had ridden down here to exterminate the hide-hunters who were slaying the bison in their stronghold; how they were even now gathered in the river bottom—between eight hundred and a thousand warriors, the flower of the Southwestern tribes.

Then Came the Indians

The sun was rising when Billy Dixon, who had gone into partnership with James Hanrahan, and who was busy about his wagon, heard a sound like low thunder and looked around. He saw Billy Ogg, the man he had sent to round up the horses, running toward him across the flat. Half a mile or so behind came the Indians on racing ponies. They came in an unbroken line, a line so long that for a moment Dixon could not believe his eyes. Then, firing his rifle, he fled for the saloon. Billy Ogg fell into the door exhausted. The long Comanche war-whoop arose, blending with the yells of the Kiowas and the Cheyennes' shrill cries. Their ponies thundered down the road before the four buildings.

In Hanrahan's saloon were James Hanrahan, Bat Masterson, Mike Welch, Shepherd, Hiram Watson, Billy Ogg, James McKinley, Bermuda Carlisle, and Billy Dixon.

Fred Leonard, James Campbell, Edward Trevor, Frank Brown, Harry Armitage, "Dutch" Henry, Billy Tyler, "Old Man" Keeler, Mike McCabe, Henry Lease, and "Frenchy" took refuge in Myers & Leonard's store, while in Rath & Wright's store were James Longton, George Eddy, Thomas O'Keefe, William Olds, Mrs. Olds, Sam Smith, and Andy Johnson. Olds and his wife, who was the only woman in the place, had just opened a restaurant in this building.

The Shadler brothers, freighters from Dodge, were sleeping in their wagon when the rush came. They died before they could grasp their rifles.

Those within the low adobe buildings were toiling as they had never toiled before, barricading the doors and windows with sacks of grain and flour. The red mass surged up against the very walls. Warriors backed their ponies against the barred portals, striving to force them. Others thrust revolvers and rifles through the windows and fired. War-whoops filled the air like the wind of a great storm.

Twenty-six Against a Thousand!

While the barricades were rising, hunters grabbed up their rifles. The booming of the deep-toned buffalo-guns sounded above the din outside. Blood dripped into the dusty road and gathered in little pools. Half a dozen huddled forms lay in the open. The morning breeze stirred their gaudy war-plumes, but the bronzed bodies were motionless. Dead ponies hampered the movements of the live ones, and a cleared space appeared where the red throng had been surging up against the building fronts. The booming of the Sharps continued, and suddenly only dead warriors and ponies remained.

The noise of receding hoof-beats lessened. Abruptly it began to swell again, and the booming of the buffalo-guns was resumed. The road and the wide bottomland beyond it was filled with naked riders, but they raced on by, firing as they rode. And when they were gone they had taken their dead away with them.

How many charges the Indians made that day was never known. But the men inside the buildings had grown into the habit of making every shot count on the buffalo range, and this now was their salvation. Twenty-six against nearly a thousand! They had a deal of killing to do if they would live, so they kept to the work. And the deadliness of their marksmanship won the fight for them. The Indians ceased charging at last because every advance cost them too dearly.

During a slack period at noon Billy Tyler came from Myers & Leonard's

store to reconnoiter, and fell before the door, shot through the body. Later the men in Hanrahan's saw a chief wearing a huge war-bonnet pitch from his running pony. A naked Comanche raced up and dragged him to the back of his own mount.

Afterward they learned that the stricken man was the great Comanche war-chief Quanah Parker.

A ricocheting bullet had knocked him senseless.

Quanah Parker Sees a Change

By four o'clock the fighting was over. The bottomland was literally sprinkled with dead horses.

How many losses the savages suffered has never been known. Anyhow the red warriors gave it up as a bad job and departed.

Occasionally during the next week a band would show up on the bluffs. It is said that Billy Dixon slew a chief at twelve hundred yards on one of these occasions.

So the red men at last decided that the neighborhood was no place for Indians, and left it.

Other hunters came drifting into the place, and within three weeks there were a hundred of them in Adobe Walls. During this period William Olds was accidentally killed by his own rifle while standing guard.

In July Billy Dixon, Bat Masterson—then in his early twenties—and two others went to Dodge City to get help. General Miles came with his troopers in August. The merchants took advantage of the presence of the soldiers to freight back their stocks to Dodge. The buffalo hunters departed—and that was the end of the town. . . .

Three years went by. The remnants of the adobe walls by Bent's Creek were barely visible when Quanah Parker, the head chief of the Comanches, came riding by in the summer of 1877.

A great change was beginning on the Llano Estacado and the ranges to the northward. For in the summer of 1875 hide hunters had again appeared near the great mesa—the best rifle-shots in the West, old-timers, skilled in stalking. They pitched their lodges of buffalo-skins and spent their evenings molding slugs, reloading the big cartridges.

Hides of the slain animals lay pegged out, drying on the plain. Laden wagons lumbered across the mesa to Fort Griffin. New trading posts sprang up along the edges of the Llano. So when the herd was growing smaller, the Comanches made their last foray.

A young chief by the name of Nigger Horse left the Fort Sill reservation with a hundred and fifty renegades. They crossed the Staked Plain and made their camp in the Pocket Canyon country, west of the Brazos River. To them came dissatisfied young men of their nation and Apaches from beyond the Pecos in New Mexico.

The days of big war-parties were over. They stole along in small bands until they sighted the camps of the hide-hunters.

Last Stand

Every morning the hunters left their tents and sought the herd, each man alone. And often late afternoon found him out of ammunition.

The renegades knew this. They picked their hunters, and waited until they were sure that ammunition was running low.

Then they closed in. And they left the scalped body surrounded by empty cartridge-shells.

There was a trading-post near the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos—Rath's store. The hide-hunters gathered there, more than a hundred of them, among them such men as Pat Garret and old "Smoky Hill" Thompson, dead shots and faultless trailers. They made up their minds it was time to do some raiding on their own account.

So forty-five of them set forth, cut the trail of the renegade bands, and followed it to Pocket Canyon. At dawn they sighted the village, and made their attack.

There were about three hundred Indians, Comanches and Apaches. The

hide-hunters held the heights on both side of the canyon, and when the savages rode out, the fire of both flanking parties was so deadly that the sortie melted away. Comanches and Apaches fled up the narrowing gorge and escaped in the broken country. They left more than fifty dead behind them.

Weeks passed before the hide-hunters got word that the renegades were camped near the western side of the Llano at a place called Casa Amarilla. They sent another expedition, which fell in with a troop of U.S. cavalry, on their way to overhaul the Indians. Had they not lost their way on the arid plain and nearly died from thirst, they would have come upon the fugitives. But this delay gave Quanah Parker his opportunity to save his tribesmen from massacre.

For he had managed to get authority from the men in charge of the reservation to bring the renegades back. He was on that mission when he passed the flat by Bent's Creek. Quanah Parker fell in with a party from Charles Goodnight's ranch. Among them was Billy Dixon. Quanah Parker leaned over and shook him by the hand. Then he rode on to bring his rebellious people back to the reservation.

By the autumn of 1878 the buffalo had vanished. Herds of cattle spread over the whole Panhandle. Within five years farmers began to follow them. Before the Eighties had well begun the barbed wire fences were appearing. At the close of that decade orchards were bearing their first fruit; alfalfa-fields were growing lush. Where the adobe walls had been was farmland.

The Timid Rustlers

A True Story of Wyoming

By MARK KNIGHT

CORWELL HYDEN, a young English adventurer, settled in Wyoming about 1860 and founded a ranch with capital borrowed from his family, who were giving him one last chance to "make good" according to their standards of success. He was very eager to succeed.

Rustlers descended on him almost at once and drove off half of his herd. Other ranchers in the vicinity were also visited by the cattle thieves but appeared better equipped to cope with the outlaws and so drove them off, sometimes cutting their losses. The situation was a bad one for Hyden, and he cudgeled his wits to find a solution.

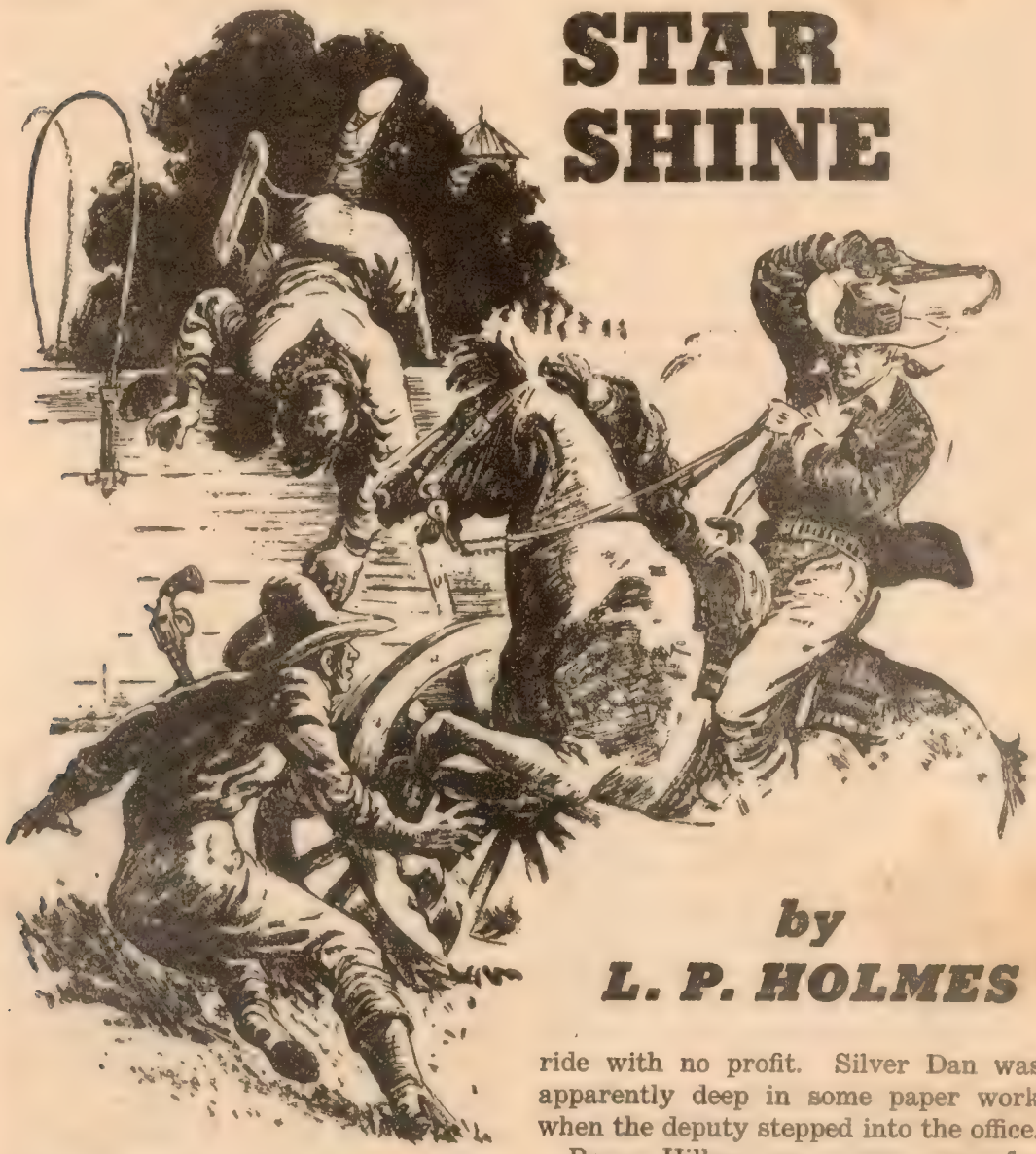
With his next to last money Hyden sent to England for powerful spy-glasses and fixed these on high towers that he built at several spots on the ranch. He placed a look-out at each of the high towers during most of the day and all of the night.

With the glasses, though not so much at night, his men could control three times as large an area as without them, and if they noted any disturbance they could signal from the tower and Hyden and those at the ranch house would proceed at once to the spot.

It is doubtful whether the idea would actually have worked, for one can not see much better with a spy glass at night than without one unless it's a special night glass such as were evolved only recently. Apparently the timid rustlers reasoned otherwise, for they stopped bothering Hyden, and when some of his neighbors adopted the trick they too were left alone!

Old Sheriff Whipple was ready to retire, but first he had to teach a young deputy that brainwork can sometimes prove better than gunplay!

STAR SHINE



by L. P. HOLMES

TIPPING his white head slightly to one side, "Silver Dan" Whipple listened to the slow drag of spurs coming down the courthouse hall toward his office, and read several answers. One was that this was his deputy, Rance Hillyer, coming in. Another was that Hillyer had had a long ride with no profit. Silver Dan was apparently deep in some paper work when the deputy stepped into the office.

Rance Hillyer was young, even for a deputy; not a day over twenty-seven. He was on the tall side, narrow of flank, but good and solid through the shoulders. He sailed his hat into a corner and let himself down into a chair with a grunt of relief that expressed his weariness. He stared straight ahead as he spun a cigarette into shape.

"Sixty miles of ridin' and not a cussed thing to show for it," he said grimly. "Tell me what I did wrong this time."

Silver Dan reached for the blackened pipe and the cuddy of tobacco on the corner of his desk.

"Yuh've hunted cougar with Johnny Step-toe a few times haven't yuh, boy?"

Rance Hillyer grunted. "Shore. What's that got to do with it?"

"Then yuh've watched Johnny's dogs at work when they run across a cat trail. The pups right away set up a heck of a clatter and do a lot of useless scamperin' around. Johnny don't pay 'em a lick of attention. He just watches that scarred-up old hound, Major, which about then will have his nose to the ground, his bony tail wavin' slow and easy. Yuh can see by the look on that old dog's face he's thinkin' and figgerin'.

"Then by'n by, old Major sticks his muzzle in the air and lets out a whoop. That means he's got the trail figgered out and it's time to go. The pups come gallopin' in to get in on the fun and Johnny Step-toe grins, for he knows it won't be long before he's got another cat hide to hang up."

"What yuh're drivin' at is that I got no more sense than a hound pup, is that it?" growled Rance.

"No," answered Silver Dan gently. "But mebbe that like any other pup yuh're still prone to do a lot of useless scamperin'."

A slight flush showed, even through the dust and sweat and scrubble of whiskers on Rance's face.

"At least I was out there tryin'. Instead of settin'—"

HE BROKE off, looking a little shamefaced. Silver Dan's expression did not change. All youngsters, he thought, were smart as all get-out until they grew old enough to learn real wisdom. Yet he used the spur just a trifle.

"Tryin' is all right, boy. But doin' is what counts."

"Mebbe yuh think yuh've got the answer figgered out?" burst out the young deputy.

Silver Dan nodded slowly. "Mebbe I have. Now run along, get cleaned up, have some grub and catch up on yore sleep. Lennie's expectin' us both out to supper tonight. I'll come by and stir yuh up in time."

The white-haired old sheriff's patience and gentleness cut through the young fellow's truculence caused by his own feeling of frustration and defeat. He retrieved his hat.

"I'm sorry, Dan," he said gruffly. "Didn't mean to act the smart aleck. Yuh're right of course. All I got to show for my efforts is a coatin' of ridin' dust."

Silver Dan smiled. "Yuh done all right, son. If all the empty trails I've rode in my time were put end to end they'd reach to the moon, I reckon. Now run along. You know Lennie well enough that when she says six o'clock, she means six o'clock."

The deputy went out. Silver Dan watched him go with real affection in his keen old eyes. One thing he sure liked about this youngster. When he'd muffed a throw he was man enough to admit it. You could, thought Silver Dan, do a heap with a man like that. You could teach him. The kind you couldn't do anything with was them who'd never admit a mistake. And a mistake had to be admitted before you could correct it.

Silver Dan stood up, lifted his hat down from the wall peg by the door. Then he went out, along the hall and on into the open.

This town of Comanche showed the influence of the Mexican traders who had first established it in the old days. It was mainly built around the four sides of an open plaza, shaded by ancient, gnarled cottonwoods. Silver Dan Whipple looked it over with affection, for it had been his town for a quarter

of a century.

Twenty-five years ago, lacking eight days, according to Dan Whipple's count, he had donned this same bay-pointed star now pinned to his shirt. Which was, he reflected, a long time for any man in the same harness. And in just eight days, Dan Whipple was going to take that star off, for good. Not because the voters had decided that way. As far as they were concerned, Silver Dan could go on wearing that star until the day he died.

Silver Dan was taking this step entirely of his volition. He was retiring. Any man grew old. Silver Dan was growing old, and was smart enough to know it. A day in the saddle now left him stiff and cramped and stove up, where, when he was Rance Hillyer's age, such a ride was nothing.

Silver Dan was tired in other ways, and what he wanted now was to go out to the ranch and stay there. He wanted to putter around with the cattle when he felt like it, or sit on the ranchhouse porch with his pipe and watch the sun go down out past the blue Bighorn Mountains.

But Silver Dan was not retiring until he had the right man to take his place. He was well aware, without the slightest hint of egotism, that any man on whom he put his seal of approval could take over the office. Which was why, for the past five years, Silver Dan had been looking for that man. In Rance Hillyer he figured he had found what he was looking for.

He had brought Rance along just as he would have gone about breaking in a colt to saddle. The young man was smart, and learned fast. But like a colt full of salt and vinegar, he would go scampering off at an angle every now and then, trying to do by sheer physical energy something better and easier done by just sitting and thinking.

In the sheriffing game, so Silver Dan had told his young deputy, there was a time to use your muscles and your gun. But most of all you had to use your head. And Rance had a good head when he stopped to use it.

Silver Dan crossed the plaza with his long, quiet, stride. The gauntness of the years was upon him, but he was still faultlessly erect and under the pulled-down brim of his old Stetson his face held a craggy hawkishness.

He turned in at Barney Carr's blacksmith shop. The big sliding door at the rear of Barney's shop was open and out there Barney was at work, straightening and refitting the fins of a rusty old windmill wheel. With a block of steel as a portable anvil, Barney would swing his hammer for a bit, then sight along the fins to see if they had been straightened and curved properly. The measured clatter of hammer on metal rang loud in the drowsy quiet of the town.

BARNEY stopped work and wiped sweat from his broad, blunt face when the sheriff sauntered up.

"Hello, Dan," he rumbled. "Next feller to bring me one of these here wind contraptions to fix up, I'm goin' to tell him to go take poison. It'll be a week tomorrow I been workin' on this for Walt Payne and I'm just gettin' it right now."

Silver Dan grinned. "Where'd Walt scrape that wreck up?"

"This is the mill that used to stand on the old McClatchy place, the one that windstorm blew over last winter. It's beginning to look like somethin' again, but it shore was a bent and banged-up mess when Walt had it hauled in here. I told him it'd cost him dang near as much to fix up as it would to buy a whole new mill. But you know how Walt is. He sees a dime different than you and me. We figger they're to spend, once in a while. Walt, he figgers they're made to be hung onto and never let go of unless yuh plain have to." Barney grinned.

"Is that so?" It was Walt Payne himself who spoke, coming in through the warm gloom of the blacksmith shop from the plaza. "Don't you jiggers go usin' my name in vain. Can I help it if I just can't stand to see things wasted? Every time I rode to town I'd see that mill layin' out in front of the old McClatchy cabin, goin' to rust and ruin, and it worried me. I asked Jeff McClatchy what he'd take for it. He said I could have it for haulin' it away. So I had Hi and Pete bring it in to Barney for fixin' up. I figger I can use that mill."

"Where yuh aim to put it up, Walt?" asked Silver Dan.

"Not shore, just yet. Mebbe over that Cold Rock Spring of mine. A little diggin' would make a good well out of Cold Rock."

Walt Payne was skinny and leathery, with bleached hair and a pointed face, a man who could find a dollar where other men found nothing, and who hung onto what he found. His boys, Hi and Pete, were younger facsimiles of their father.

"Well," admitted Silver Dan, "once I read somewheres a line that said 'Never waste, never want'. It makes a lot of sense."

"Durn right!" Walt Payne nodded his narrow head emphatically. "Any line yet on the robbin' and killin' of Sime Martin?"

Silver Dan got out his pipe. "Pretty tough to figger, that one," he murmured. "Of course, me bein' down to Iron Hill at the time, was sort of unlucky."

"That young squirt deputy of yores was around, wasn't he?"

There was a sly maliciousness in Walt Payne's question. Once Payne had tried to promote his eldest son, Hi, to a deputy's badge, but without success.

"Rance Hillyer," said Silver Dan quietly, "was on the job in a hurry. For a young feller he's done mighty blame well."

"But he didn't catch anybody."

"No," admitted Silver Dan gravely. "He didn't—yet . . . Well, I'll be gettin' along."

He went back toward the plaza. Walt Payne watched the old silver-thatched sheriff, then said to Barney Carr:

"Dan's gettin' pretty well along. Kind of losin' his grip, wouldn't yuh say, Barney?"

"No," answered Barney bluntly. "No, I wouldn't say so. For my money Dan Whipple was, is and always will be the best durn sheriff ever to pack a star. I got money that says he'll round up them who killed Sime Martin and robbed his safe. He's one wise old fox, Dan Whipple is."

Next door to Barney Carr's blacksmith shop stood Bill Yardley's hay and grain warehouse. Above that, reached by an inside stairway, dark and rickety, was Sime Martin's old law office. Silver Dan climbed these stairs and let himself into the office with a key he had.

The office looked as Sime Martin had, old and yellowed and dusty. There was a desk, a couple of chairs, several shelves of ancient law books. In the corner was an old-fashioned iron safe, the door of which was now open, with marks of battering and scars where a cold chisel had been used ruthlessly to pry and gouge.

Just inside the office door, on the raw and ancient boards of the floor was a dark, ragged stain. Here was where Sime Martin's dead body had been found lying, skull crushed in by a savage blow with some narrow, heavy club.

Martin had been a lawyer, but had also dabbled in money-lending, generally demanding a first mortgage as security, but in rare cases he had been known to loan fairly sizable amounts on a personal note. Rumor had it that he had kept a lot of money in that old safe of his.

SILVER DAN looked over the office. It was not his first trip up here since the killing and robbery. Already he had meticulously gathered up every scrap of paper in the place and had it locked up in the safe in his own office. While his deputy, young Rance Hillyer, had been doing a lot of riding, Silver Dan had busied himself going over those various papers and had gleaned several ideas. Now he was checking something else.

The single office window, dusty and cobwebbed, looked down over Barney Carr's blacksmith shop and the area out back. Out there Barney was at work on that old windmill again, hammering away, the clank and clang of his hammer beating out vibrant echoes. For some time Silver Dan stood there, puffing at his pipe, his steel-blue eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

Half an hour later he left, locking the door behind him. He stopped in at several places about the plaza—at Denny Toland's general store, "Butch" Logg's Quiet Hour Saloon, Tex Vance's saddle and harness shop. Then, with the sun dropping well into the west he went over to the hotel and roused a tousle-headed Rance Hillyer. . . .

Lenore Whipple, or Lennie as she was best known, was a slim, brown-haired girl, pretty in a brown, outdoorsy way, with her dad's blue eyes, and a quick, bright smile.

They had a nice supper together, the three of them—Lennie, Silver Dan and Rance Hillyer. Then, while Rance helped Lennie do up the dishes, Silver Dan went out on the ranchhouse porch, sought a favorite chair and sat down to smoke and watch the blue dusk thicken.

Faintly to his ears came the clatter of dishes in the kitchen, punctuated by Lennie's bright laughter and the deep drawl of Rance Hillyer. A little later they began singing, a trick they had when together. Their voices were untrained, but were young and rich and true and it was music of contentment in Silver Dan's ears.

He wouldn't, he thought, trade places right now with a king. Except for one thing. A dirty job had to be done, one that could get dirtier before he was through with it. The toughest job a lawman ever had to do was go gather in a man who had, up to the time he made his big mistake, been a reasonably good citizen, an acquaintance, even a friend.

An hour later, Silver Dan and his deputy were on their way back to town. In the office, the sheriff locked the door, opened the safe, and dumped a bundle of papers on the desk under the light of the old hanging lamp.

"Want yuh to go through these with me, son," he said quietly to Rance Hillyer. "Sime Martin's stuff. We'll sort out the loan papers."

As the young deputy scanned one document after another, Silver Dan guardedly watched him, thinking that he was a good-looking lad, with his tawny hair, and the angle of the light picking out the clean, strong lines of his features.

Rance grunted. "Who would have thought that Sime Martin did as big a loan business as this, or that fellers like Barney Carr owed him money?"

"Barney borrowed that four months ago," said Silver Dan. "Barney's sister, a widowed lady down in Brentwood, had to go to a hospital and didn't have the ready money. Barney sent it to her. Good man, that blacksmith."

Silver Dan laid a small, worn, leather-backed note book on the desk.

"Here's the notebook yuh found in Sime's coat pocket when yuh searched the body. Remember? Well, in it is listed all the loans Sime had made for the past five years. Sort of a personal handy record he could refer to quick, without goin' to his safe. Lists each loan—who to, how much, date the loan was made and date paid, if it had been paid. Let's check the unpaid loans against what yuh've sorted out."

This did not take long, with Rance

quoting the loan and Silver Dan checking against the notebook.

"There's one entry here with no note to check against it, son," Silver Dan said gravely. "Take another look through that stuff and see can yuh find one of twelve hundred dollars, drawn to Walt Payne."

The deputy went through the papers carefully, shook his head.

"Can't find it, Dan."

"Neither could I," murmured Silver Dan.

YOUNG HILLYER leaned back, began building a smoke, jerked suddenly straight in his chair.

"Good glory! Why, Dan, there's a motive! But it couldn't be. Walt Payne wouldn't—"

Silver Dan nodded bleakly. "Why wouldn't he? Human nature has some queer streaks in it, son, where money is concerned. Yuh never know what money will make some men do. And yuh would never guess the man until he's done it. Yuh've learned right here the first big lesson of this law game. Behind every crime there's a motive. Find that motive and your job is half done."

"But Walt Payne!" blurted Rance.

The old sheriff stoked his pipe. "Let's go over this thing from the first. The stage leaves a handful of mail at Denny Toland's store for Sime Martin. Sime don't call for it as he usually does, so Denny takes it up to Sime's office. Nobody answers to Denny's knock, but when Denny tries the door, it ain't locked. Denny goes in. He finds Sime dead, just inside the door, head smashed in. Sime's safe has been broken open and rifled. Whatever the robber was after, he'd taken. The rest of Sime's records were left scattered around. Yuh had a good look at the safe, didn't yuh, son?"

"Yeah. They shore had worked that lock over."

"Right! Think they could have done that without makin' quite a racket?"

"No-o. But—"

"This is generally a quiet town," cut in Silver Dan. "Steady poundin' with a hammer and cold chisel on that safe would have been heard by somebody, usually. But I've talked to a lot of folks like Tex Vance, Butch Logg, and Denny Toland, and none of 'em heard anything but Barney Carr at work, straightenin' out that old windmill that Walt Payne's boys hauled in and dumped out back of the blacksmith shop. I asked Walt Payne where he intended to set that mill up and he said probably over that Cold Rock Spring of his."

"What sense would there be in that?" demanded Rance. "Piute Creek runs within four hundred yards of Cold Rock Spring, furnishin' all the water Walt Payne's cows need on that chunk of range."

Silver Dan grinned. Now the pup was beginning to get hold of the real trail.

"I asked myself the same question, son—and got the same answer you did. There wouldn't be any sense to puttin' a mill up over Cold Rock. Just useless expense, and Walt Payne was never one to spend money for no reason."

Now Rance was on his feet pacing up and down the office. His eyes were gleaming.

"That side window of Sime Martin's office. It looks right down over Barney Carr's blacksmith shop. If two men were in Martin's office, one could stand by that window and watch Barney workin' on that mill and call out about how Barney was hammerin'. The other feller, workin' on the safe, could swing his hammer at the same time, and—"

"That's it, son. Yuh got it, now. Tomorrow mornin' we'll go out and bring 'em in. . . ."

When Silver Dan Whipple and his deputy, young Rance Hillyer, jogged up to Walt Payne's headquarters along lower Piute Creek the next morning, Walt and his two boys, Hi and Pete, were hooking a team up to the ranch heavy work wagon.

Walt Payne greeted Silver Dan and Rance Hillyer almost jovially.

"We're goin' to town to get our windmill, Dan. I feel good about that mill. A fine chunk of machinery was goin' to rank waste. Now it's fixed up and it'll pump water for my cows for a long time."

The sheriff lounged in his saddle. "Ain't afraid of Piute Creek runnin' dry are yuh, Walt? Never did that I can remember. So I can't help wonderin' just why yuh'd want to put a mill over Cold Rock Spring."

Payne hesitated a trifle over his answer. "I didn't say I would shore put it over Cold Rock."

"Barney Carr had to do a heap of noisy hammerin' to get that mill fixed," went on Silver Dan casually. "For the past week folks in town say they couldn't hear nothin' but Barney whangin' away. When a feller thinks on it, the racket Barney made would shore cover up the noise the robbers and killers had to make to get Sime Martin's safe open. Now, if I was aimin' to bust open a man's safe and I wanted some racket to be made to cover up the noise I'd be makin' on that safe, I might haul an old windmill to the blacksmith next door and tell him to fix it. So the hammerin' he'd have to do on the job would drown out the noise. . . . Look out, Rance!"

RANCE was looking out. In fact, he had been doing a far better job of looking out than Silver Dan had himself. So it was that when Hi Payne, the eldest of Walt's two sons, climbing to the wagon seat, suddenly threw back the cover to the jockey box and grabbed the .45 Colt gun hidden there, it was Rance who was set for him.

Rance beat Hi Payne to the shot by a split whisker. Hi Payne coughed and toppled off the wagon. Rance gigged his horse sharply, brought it ahead in one long leap, then dived from the saddle to land on Pete, who had the gun and was coming up and around with a wicked snarl on his young face.

The impact of Rance's dive knocked young Pete flat. Rance had the gun jerked out of Pete's hand before Pete, half-stunned, could recover. As for Walt Payne, he was dipping a hand into the open front of his faded, sweat-stained old shirt, going for a shoulder gun when Silver Dan dragged his gun and cuffed Walt solidly above the ear with the heavy barrel.

The old sheriff looked over at Rance.

"Yuh did fine, son," he said gravely. "I wasn't set at all for that break Hi made. He'd have got me, shore, if yuh hadn't been on the lookout keener than I was. I shore am gettin' too old. And I liked the way yuh didn't do any more shootin' than yuh had to. There's some I know who would have plugged Pete, too. But you didn't—and I liked that. Yeah, yuh're ready to lead the pack from here on. . . ."

THEY were sitting on the ranchhouse porch again—Silver Dan Whipple, his girl, Lennie, and Rance Hillyer. Lennie was listening big-eyed and grave, while Silver Dan told the story.

"Pete wouldn't open up at all, but Walt Payne did, mainly for Pete's sake, I reckon. It was Hi who killed Sime Martin. Hit him over the head with a steel pry bar when Sime came in unexpected and found Hi and Pete workin' on that safe. I'm satisfied to believe that. Hi's dead, so puttin' the blame on him won't do no harm. And it'll save young Pete from the rope."

Lennie Whipple shivered. "It—it's all so dreadful. To think that people we've known. . . . Why, I went to school with Hi and Pete Payne."

"It's the price a man pays every once in a while for bein' in the law game, lass," said Silver Dan gravely.

He wanted Lennie to have a good look at that price, so she would know what she would have to face in the future if she and Rance should hit it off

as all the signs were pointing. Now was the time she had to realize such things and make up her mind, one way or the other. Being the wife of a sheriff had its tough moments. None knew that better than Silver Dan himself, looking back to the days when Lennie's mother had been alive.

"If they'd been real smart," said Rance, "they'd have taken away all those notes, instead of just the one they owed. Had they done that, they'd have covered up their trail, plenty!"

"Something for yuh always to remember, son," said Silver Dan. "A shore enough smart man don't get outside the law. Them that do are never quite smart enough to cover up all the sign. There is always somethin' they forget."

Rance was quiet for a long time. "I wish Hi hadn't gone for that gun," he finally said gruffly.

Silver Dan, watching, saw Lennie put a slim hand on Rance's arm. Silver Dan nodded, content. Lennie had made up her mind and made it up right. It would be fine to keep the star in the family, thought Silver Dan contentedly. Yeah, now the weary old hound could rest and doze in the sun and the pup could figure trail and do the running.

They Rode The Mail

IN 1861, when the last official rider of the Pony Express clattered to a stop and the last mochila was stripped from the bronc's sweaty back, the dawn of a mechanized age was at hand.

Yet this early version of the air mail was not completely through. In various parts of the country, for years to come, mail continued to be carried horseback where no other transportation was available, or where the country was mostly "up and down" rather than straight across.

"Pony Bob" Haslam, the most famous rider of the Express with the possible exception of Buffalo Bill Cody, seemed to like the work well enough to stay with it. In 1868 he was riding a mail route between Virginia City and Reno, across the deserts and mountains of Nevada. It was Pony Bob who had set the all-time record for a Pony Express rider. The usual run was about 35 miles, during which the rider changed horses three times and rode at full gallop all the way. And such a ride was considered a full day's work, for the pounding a man took was real punishment. But it was not uncommon for a man to find his relief rider out of action when he pulled in at a station and in such case he would go on himself. Pony Bob's record was 380 miles—36 consecutive hours in the saddle!

From Nevada, Pony Bob went to Idaho, following the retreating frontier. He was riding the mail there when the Modoc Indians went on the warpath. Pony Bob was one of the bravest men alive. His refusal to turn back was legendary. Once he had charged his horse through more than 20 hostile Indians and gotten clear away. On the start of this run he went ten miles and counted something like 90 scalped corpses.

"It was getting a little thick," Haslam said, "but I wasn't that ready to give up riding." So back he went.

The last pony mail rider in the Western United States was probably Shorty Neal, who packed the mail between Sombrero Butte and Copper Creek, in Arizona. It was not until 1945 that Shorty went out of business and improved roads finally put a steel jallopy on the route instead of a horse. So don't let anyone tell you that the Pony Express died in 1861. Officially, yes, but its last gasp was not until 1945.

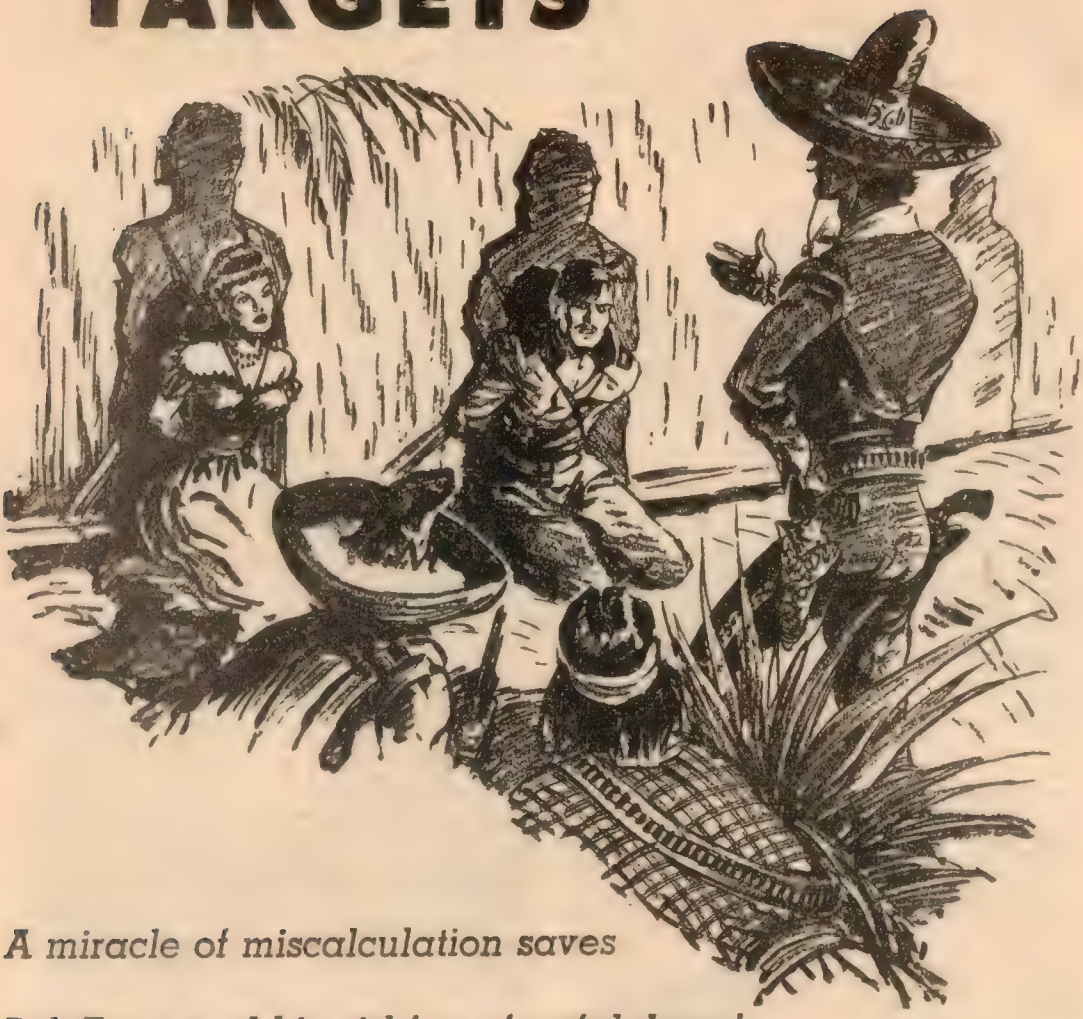
—Rex Sherrick.

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

① WHAT DEFECT IN INDIAN STRATEGY LED TO THEIR DEFEAT?
② WHERE IS A COWBOY FROM WHO TIES HIS ROPE TO THE SADDLE HORN?
③ HOW DID A BLIZZARD HELP TO END THE OPEN RANGE?
④ DID ALL GUNMEN WEAR THEIR PISTOLS IN A HIP-HOLSTER?
⑤ WHAT WAS THE ROAD-AGENT'S SPIN?

The answers are on Page 176—if you MUST look!

TARGETS



A miracle of miscalculation saves

Bob Terry and his girl from fearful doom!

Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson

FIRST LIEUTENANT BOB TERRY stepped closer to his "shavetail," Chet Burns. "If only we can finish these target tests before Mario goes on the rampage again!" he said gravely. His glance went to the dry, cactus-covered arroyo where for days the men had been digging target pits and setting up a new type of target.

Chet Burns turned and stared over the cottonwood tree tops that hid the Rio Grande below them and focused his eyes on the dusty plains and distant mountains of old Mexico across the way.

"That Apache hellion has been quiet too long." He shook his head. "When he does bust loose again, he'll make up for lost time, sure as shooting."

"I wish that our shooting was sure!"

Terry looked worried.

He was a pioneer in striving for improved marksmanship in the Army, and even then was engaged in developing new theories of musketry and making them applicable to combat usage. Mario, the half-breed Apache chief of a subtribe of Chiricahua Apaches, was a constant pain in the neck to Terry, and an interference in his work, raiding across the Border, burning, torturing and slaying.

Everytime Terry settled down for a space to dig target pits and start on target practice work, Mario would go on the rampage and have to be chased for weary days. Finally Mario, temporarily sated, would lead his Chiricahuas back into Mexico and there would be an interlude of quiet.

Terry's own company of cavalry was equipped with the Sharps carbine and by dint of much striving he had managed to wangle a complete extra set of the Springfield rifles carried by the infantry—these being more accurate at long ranges. They were good guns for their day and time, and packed an awful wallop, what with a .45 caliber bullet weighing 500 grains, or about three-quarters of an ounce. When man or animal was hit by one of those things, there was no doubt about it—it stopped them in their tracks with a wallop like the kick of a government mule!

IN AN effort to cut down Mario's raids, the regiment was strung along the Rio Grande, with patrols keeping contact between each company sector. Terry's sector was down below old Fort Hancock and extended along the river some twenty miles. It was a fairly lonely patrol line, winding among cottonwood trees and through meadows that stretched along the river.

There was only one bright spot to recommend it and that was a ranch-house owned by an American cattleman named Mark Donaldson. At the ranch-house there were two attractions in Donaldson's two daughters, Toni and Betty, a pair of roses blooming in the desert, as it were. It was an eight-mile ride to the ranch-house and eight miles back, but to Terry and his lieutenant the distance seemed nothing.

Personally, Terry thought Toni was the lovelier of the two, while Second Lieutenant Chet Burns grew ecstatic about Betty, the younger girl, and this arrangement was satisfactory to all concerned. The father, a widower, was pleased to have the girls' loneliness alleviated by a little gaiety, and welcomed the two cavalry officers hospitably.

Of course, both could not call at the same time since one always had to be on duty with the company, but each one, making the patrol on alternate days, managed to end up at the Donaldson ranch-house.

It was the third time Terry had called there that Mr. Donaldson told him of Mario's infatuation for Toni. The half-breed had made formal offer for her hand and, on being refused, had threatened to pursue his suit in spite of the father.

After hearing this, Terry had examined the ranch-house more closely wondering whether it could be defended in case of attack by Mario and his Chiricahuas. It was evident that Donaldson had built the place with the idea of defense in mind, for the ranch-house, a rambling, thick-walled adobe affair, could be held by a handful against heavy attack.

The defensive strength of the ranch-house was comforting but the news that Mario, the half-breed, had threatened to pursue his suit, put a crackle of menace in the air. It added the bubbles of danger to the still wine of romance, reflected Terry, growing poetical.

Mario, however, kept strangely quiet of late, almost ominously so—and Terry used the comparatively peaceful period to intensify his musketry experiments, in which his second lieutenant enthusiastically abetted him. Between them

they had increased the ability of the troop to the point where probably their company was the best bunch of shots in the Army. This had all been done on regular bull's-eye targets.

Then Terry began to dream of more practical and realistic practise, something approximating actual battle conditions. It was during this period that he conceived the first silhouette targets ever used by the Army. The first ones were clumsy things made out of wood from ration boxes and anything else they could find, roughly shaped like the human figure and pasted over with newspapers daubed with mud to make them less conspicuous. He stuck them around in the small valley they used for target range individually to begin with, but later conceived the idea of having them lined up in groups like an attacking enemy. Then he devised the single bar on which some sixteen targets were nailed and a swivel arrangement whereby they could all be raised or lowered simultaneously. It was then that he dreamed up the idea of the proficiency tests to measure the effectiveness of the combined fire of many rifles under simulated battle conditions at unknown ranges and from unexpected directions, such as would be encountered in real warfare.

The troopers were enthusiastic and dug the rifle pits and came up with suggestions and in general showed the liking the average American soldier has for anything to do with shooting.

They dug several alternative pits around on the slopes of the valley. It was Terry's idea to make Chet Burns, his second lieutenant, the guinea pig for these experiments, to have Chet take the company out and develop its fire against unknown targets at unknown distances and see what the results might be.

They worked at high speed, taking advantage of the lull in Mario's activities and striving to complete the experiment before the half-breed erupted again and forced them to leave their work to chase him.

The targets were finished, the pits dug and everything in readiness at the end of the second week. The test was set for the following morning. It was Terry's turn to take the river patrol with its goal at Donaldson's ranch and an evening with Donaldson's daughters, especially Toni. For, he had come to the conclusion that the slim, dark-haired girl was the one and only, and that life without her would be a long, grim, sorry affair, a conclusion which he planned to announce to her that evening with a view to forestalling such a dire possibility.

"I might be late," he told Chet Burns, "and if so, will send the patrol back and catch a few winks of sleep on Donaldson's living room couch and come get here in time for the firing." This was nothing unusual for either of them, entailing as it did a wonderful breakfast with the girls, which was no hardship, any way you looked at it.

BEFORE departing, Terry made a final check on the targets and target pits. It was while dismounted, examining the ropes holding the target rows in place, that he saw the tiny shreds of fiber on the ground and knew instinctively what they were. They were the fibers of baked mescal, the staple food of the Apaches on the warpath. Examining the ground more carefully, he found other shreds of the stuff and the prints of many moccasined feet. Following these up, he found pony tracks and estimated that there must have been eighteen or twenty Indians around the pits between three o'clock, the time the troopers had quit work and the present time, which was about five o'clock.

This was disquieting. It was the first sign of the Apaches anyone had seen in some four weeks. It might or might not mean that Mario was on the move again.

Doubt assailed Terry as to whether it was wise to leave the company under such conditions. Then he reflected that Chet Burns was a dependable bird and would take care of anything that came up. In any case, he had to make the patrol if only on the chance that Mario would appear at Donaldson's ranch.

Giving a final look at the targets, he decided that it would not be wise to have the markers and the men operating the targets sent up so far from support by the rest of the company, in case of sudden attack. He had the targets raised and tied in place, in readiness to receive the fire in the morning, and rode back to tell Burns.

Chet got the big idea and immediately strengthened his outguards and moved the company wagons up into corral and had additional shelter provided with ration boxes and logs.

"In case you are late, I'm to take the company out and fire ten rounds per man at each of the targets—that is, if Mario doesn't jump us?"

"Exactly!" Terry nodded and rode away with the patrol.

Along the river it was cool among the cottonwoods and quiet, ominously quiet. It impressed itself upon Terry whose mind was a turmoil of thoughts about Mario and the Apaches; the shooting experiment of the next morning; and the kindness Toni's glance, the last time he had spoken to her.

Darkness had fallen by the time Terry and his patrol arrived at the Donaldson place with its lights gleaming a welcome from the patio and house. The troopers had reason to like the place, for the Mexican peons looked after their horses for them, they were given a sumptuous meal, and old man Donaldson always managed to slip them a few rounds of drinks.

Toni, dressed in white, smiled a welcome to Terry, with Betty, her sister, adding her shy greeting. Old man Donaldson filled his glass with a good drink before they sat down to the candle-lighted table. From time to time Terry's and Toni's eyes met and clung, and for a space they were forgetful of the other two at table. After the dessert was served, old man Donaldson, grunting something about a sick horse, disappeared, followed shortly by Betty, and Terry and Toni were alone.

It didn't take them long to reach an understanding, but it took a great deal of persuading to get Toni to set a date some three months hence.

Old Donaldson, when he returned, knew the situation before they spoke, and made no objection, stating, after his permission was asked, that he "didn't know, but Toni might do a dang sight worse than marry Terry!" Betty kissed him and her sister, and the old man got out a bottle of fine Madeira to drink their healths.

It was while they were drinking the toast that a barefooted peon came in and whispered something in Mr. Donaldson's ear.

The old man looked up angrily and started to rise. Betty and Toni looked anxious.

"It's that danged Mario! He's got about fifty men outside the gates and insists on coming in here to talk to me. Well, tell him he can come in alone!"

Terry sat bolt upright. It was late, and he had already sent the patrol back to camp. He strode over and put on his pistol belt.

"Hadn't we better guard the gates?" he asked his host.

"No, loot'nent, I got twenty o' my Mexicans up there along the walls with guns. They won't let any one in!" said Donaldson, simply. "But maybe it'd be better if you and the girls sat outside while I *hablo* with this snake."

There was a step outside and a brilliant figure stood in the doorway, a slender, dark-faced man with a small mustache. He was dressed in the clothes of a Mexican dandy—black velvet bolero jacket with silver buttons, silk shirt, silver embroidered velvet trou-

sers that flared out below the knee, and silver spurs. He carried a great sombrero, heavy with silver bullion ornaments.

It came over Terry suddenly that the fellow had come courting and he foresaw complications when the dark-eyed swarthy half-breed should discover that he had come too late.

For a second Mario stood there, his eyes boring into Terry's like a beam of white-hot hatred.

"Ah!" said Mario suavely. "Eet is the *senor teniente* whose *soldados* shoot all day at the white pieces of paper on the hill! Is it then that they shoot so poorly that they must waste so much good powder on white paper?" His voice dripped venom.

The two girls sat silent, worried at the sudden brittleness of the atmosphere in that room, surcharged so quickly with violent hatred.

Terry took his time replying.

"Oh, I don't know," he said at last. "I wouldn't advise you to count too heavily on their not being able to shoot. You might let yourself in for a heavy disappointment!" Looking at the man and thinking of all the murdering and torturing of men, women and children that Mario had callously incited, Terry's eyes were implacably cold.

"Deesappointment, you say!" Mario's voice still dripped venom. "No, I would not be deesappoint', so long as I stand in the place at wheech they are aiming!"

Terry shrugged his shoulders.

"Any time you want to take the place of one of the targets, I'll be happy to oblige you!" he returned, equably. "My men, I'm sure, would be very happy to aid in proving your ideas wrong!"

WHAT retort he would have made to this Terry never knew, for at that moment, Toni, becoming alarmed at the rising tension between the two men, rose from her seat at the table.

"Bob," she addressed Terry by his first name, "wouldn't you rather join my sister and me out on the porch where the air is pleasanter and leave this gentleman—" she put a faint edge of scorn on the word "gentleman" as her eyes flicked over Mario—"and leave this gentleman to discuss whatever business he has with my father?"

Both girls looked at Terry expectantly. There was nothing to do but acquiesce, and he rose. Mario was startled for a second, then addressed Toni.

"*Senorita,* could I speak with you in private for a moment?" To give the devil his due he spoke courteously and bowed. But he straightened out from that bow like the snap of a whip when her reply came.

"*Senor* Mario—" her voice came very clearly—"there is nothing, of any importance, I am sure, that would require your seeing me either in public or in private!"

Turning away from him, she smiled at Terry. "Shall we go?" she said.

Had she publicly slapped him across the face with her glove the effect on Mario could have been no greater. His face turned deadly pale, and he half crouched, hands clenched, as though to spring at her.

Terry dropped his hand to his revolver butt. Donaldson stepped forward, his hand hovering negligently above his holster and motioned Terry and the girls, with a jerk of his head, to leave.

Very much loath to depart and feeling a little like a tame cat in tow of the two sisters, Terry followed them out. Looking back from the doorway, he found Mario's eyes fixed upon him with something deadly and murderous in their intensity. Terry's flesh crawled. He half wished to settle with Mario at once, but Toni was urging him along with her arm linked in his.

Under the magic of the Southwest moon and the soft music Betty was strumming on her guitar, and with Toni close beside him, Terry was able to

throw off the uneasiness caused by his unpleasant encounter with Mario. Occasionally they heard the half-breed's excited tones and then it would be drowned out by Donaldson's steady quiet voice.

It seemed all too short a time when the scrape of chairs and the clump of feet coming toward the door announced that the meeting was ended. Mario came out first, looking like a thundercloud; and Terry noted that, behind him, Donaldson had his hand on his gun butt, not taking any chances of a sudden flare-up by the half-breed.

Mario halted for a moment, facing Toni in the moonlight, and bowed.

"I weesh you and your *novio* gr-r-eat joy, *Senorita!*" he said smoothly. There was an unpleasant tigerish purring beneath his words that made them all silent as he stamped away, mounted his horse and rode out the gate of the ranch-house patio, galloping off with a typical rush and swirl, with the hoofbeats of many unshod ponies drumming after him.

The girls' father excused himself, mumbling something about "bein' dog tired." Toni asked him what Mario had been talking about.

"Oh, nothin' much. He asked my permission to marry you and I told him, polite enough, that he was too late, that you had already found your *novio*. He made a little foolish talk and I told him to git outa here!"

"So that was all!" remarked Toni ironically as the old man departed.

Terry and the two girls discussed this for a few moments and the girls resumed their light-hearted talk and singing while the moon sank lower in the sky and the river valley became black and formless.

Still their voices rose and fell until it became well past midnight. Terry had already made up his mind to return to camp instead of waiting until daylight, not liking the presence of Mario in the vicinity, and planned to move his company out at daylight in an effort to capture him. The two girls tried to dissuade him, but he was firm. His horse danced around impatiently in the darkness as he swung into the saddle.

"*Hasta manana,* Bob," came Toni's liquid voice and there was more than a note of worry in her tone. "I am so afraid that beastly Mario and his men will try to waylay you! Do be careful!"

"*Hasta manana!*" he echoed. "No fear!" and he was gone into the darkness.

His mount, skittish and impatient at the start, settled down after passing the gate and corrals. The animal became alert and moved cautiously, ears forward, feet gathered and poised like a cat, sniffing suspiciously of the night air. Terry knew his horse too well to disregard the warning. There was something or someone on the trail ahead.

THERE were about two hundred yards of meadow between him and the cottonwood grove through which the trail led. The horse grew more and more suspicious and worried, the closer he approached the dark clump of trees until suddenly he halted, his neck outstretched and nostrils working. It was too strong a hint to disregard!

Terry turned his mount at right angles to the trail and rode quietly down toward the river bottom. The ripple and splash of the waters grew louder as they approached the stream and soon he forced his horse into the water, facing it upstream. The splash of the animal's hoofs seemed overly loud to Terry's straining ears and he quickly moved back, riding instead on the sandy shore.

The sand seemingly muffled all sound of his progress and he moved along as silent as a phantom horseman, ducking to avoid the overhanging branches. His horse seemed aware of the need for

silence for it moved forward all alert and tense, neck arched and nostrils quivering.

The more Terry thought of a possible ambush by Mario and his mixed outfit of Apaches and half-breeds, the angrier he grew. He decided to find out, somehow, where they were hiding and then try to bring the troopers from camp quickly enough to catch Mario out of hand. It was a long chance but worth the taking, he figured. After he had traveled about eight hundred yards further, he swung his horse up the bank into the cottonwoods. Here he tethered his mount in a thick clump of trees and brush and unbuttoned the flap of his revolver holster. Another fifty or sixty yards brought him to the main trail where he stood listening and trying to see through the inky darkness.

After a few futile moments, he decided to back-trail toward the Donaldson ranch, hoping to locate Mario and his crew somewhere in between.

He had gone scarcely fifty yards down the trail when he came to a sudden halt. Clearly borne on the night air came the unmistakable sound of a saddled horse shaking itself. He knew it was not his own mount because he had left it far behind him. He crept on.

As he advanced he could hear considerable stamping and pawing and the rustling of leaves as they were torn from the brush. From the sounds Terry judged that there were many horses, as many as fifty or sixty, hidden out there in the thicket.

That Mario and his band were waiting for him in ambush seemed far-fetched. It was far more likely that they were holding themselves in readiness for an attack on the Donaldson ranch-house, and the thought chilled him with its logical certainty.

His line of action was marked out for him. He must get back to camp and turn out his men as quickly as the good Lord would let him. But first he must make sure of his facts.

As he crept forward, the sounds of the horses grew louder, and he heard low-pitched, gutteral voices speaking Apache. A strong odor of Indian assailed his nostrils. They were there in force, some sixty of them, judging by the sound. And it was clear to him that they were but awaiting the hour before dawn to move forward to the attack of the ranch-house.

There would be little time left to stop them, Terry figured. In his haste to turn back toward his camp and his troopers, he stepped out and collided, full tilt, with a greasy form in the darkness. There came a surprised grunt and an Apache guttural remark.

There was no time for Terry to draw his revolver. He struck out with his fist and came into violent and painful contact with a rifle barrel. Luckily the distance was so short that he had not been able to develop the full force of a blow, else he would undoubtedly have broken his hand. As it was he ripped out a few short and intense oaths, good old Anglo-Saxon expletives that instantly identified him as a white man.

For one dizzying second it seemed that the firmament was raining Apaches. They dropped on him from every conceivable angle, silent, intent and businesslike. The next few minutes were the busiest that he had ever spent for being crowded with sheer, nightmarish action. He was doggedly hitting out in every direction, at every head that rose, varying this by kicking at every moccasined foot and bare shin within reach.

The pitch darkness aided him in some measure, as well as did his strategy in picking up, first one, then another of his attackers and throwing them, kicking and spitting, into the midst of their fellows, who immediately proceeded to claw and lam them under the impression that it was the white man. By thus confusing the issue, he managed to separate his attackers into several

struggling groups and to slide out of the melee.

One persistent Indian clung like a leech to his neck, whooping and yelling and striving mightily to claw out his eyes, but Terry banged him emphatically against a tree trunk and broke away, dodging between milling Apaches, until he was almost out of the fight, and headed up the trail to his horse.

HE WAS not, however, to get away that easily, for the nearest struggling group untangled themselves and ceased their confused fighting. Their keen ears evidently heard him pounding up the trail, for they set forth in pursuit, yelling like all the fiends of hell. He swung about and fired point blank into blobs of dark shadow behind him, thinking that if it accomplished nothing more, the sound of the shots would at least warn Donaldson's ranch and put them on the alert.

The Apaches made no attempt to return the fire, which puzzled him, until he reasoned that undoubtedly their orders were to take him alive! But whatever the reason, his four quick shots slowed up the pursuit, and he turned and fled silently, turning off the trail and into the cottonwood. Not until he was in the saddle once more did he realize how shaken he was. Cold sweat dripped from him, his hands trembled and his heart pounded suffocatingly. Terry believed that he had escaped by nothing less than a miracle.

Above him on the trail he heard running feet and guttural voices. To get back to camp through that mob of Apaches would he impossible if he continued the way he was going. Quickly he swung his horse toward the river and pushed him along the sandy stretch of bank, trusting to Providence and the cleverness of his mount to avoid potholes and pools and treacherous quicksand. Making another mile or so this way, he halted and listened. Hearing nothing, he decided that he had lost his pursuers and could make better progress on the trail.

The darkness of the night was still so thick that he could discern nothing. Nor could he hear anything except the pensive sighing of the breeze through the tree tops and the ripple below him of the waters of the Rio Grande.

It may have been that the breeze was blowing in the wrong direction for his horse gave no sign that a hostile presence was near. Without a second's warning a whirring loop dropped over his head and snapped tightly about his arms. In another second he was jerked roughly out of the saddle and struck the ground with such force that he lay half stunned. Then he was struck violently on the side of the head, and consciousness left him.

How long afterward before he began to recover consciousness, he could not determine. He ached all over, and there was an intolerable throbbing in his head. It took him some time, in his befuddled state to discover that he was bound to a sort of broad stake. Water was dripping from his head down to his shoulders; his uniform was soaked, and he shivered in the cool air of early dawn.

"So-o! At last the so brave *teniente* has recovered his senses, yes?" A mocking voice broke on his ears, and he looked upward, his brain beginning to function more rapidly at sound of that voice. Standing above him, arms akimbo, was Mario, the half-breed. The effort of looking upward from his strained position made Terry dizzy for a space but when skyline and foreground ceased gyrating, he recognized his surroundings. He was on the target range and below, partially seen at the valley mouth, was his own camp. It was then that he realized he was tied to one of the silhouette targets, with other targets of the group extending out to his right and left. The significance of this did not at once occur to him, because at that moment he saw

another figure tied to one of the other targets some six feet away. Mario's voice again broke on his ears.

"So! The so brave *teniente* with his so beeg talk, weel marry the *Senorita* Toni! *'Sta bueno!* Mario, who asked for her hand, will now be fine *caballero* and be—how you call eet?—best man to help wedding—ver' nize wedding weeth *soldados* Americanos making big salute with rifles!"

"What in blazes are you talking about?" Terry demanded.

"You don't know?" Mario looked surprised and then stepped to one side, letting Terry see clearly that other figure tied a few feet away.

Terry's heart gave a great leap. It was Toni—pale and misty-eyed but smiling at him bravely.

"Great heavens!"

Terry jerked helplessly at the cords that bound him. "How did you get here!" he called.

She shook her head. It was Mario who answered for her.

"Ver' simple. The *senorita* hear your shooting and try to get her *padre* to go help. But no, he say too much danger, so she coom down quiet and saddle horse and coom to help her so brave *teniente*! Then Mario catch her! Mario ver' polite to *senorita,* ask her again to become *esposa* but she say no, she rather die weeth her so brave *teniente* than be marry with Mario! So Mario geev her her weesh! She weel die weeth her so brave *teniente*!"

"Mario, you are a fool, completely *loco*!" shouted Terry. "Never mind what you do with me, but let the *senorita* go free! No one but a *perro,* a dog, would so treat a woman!" Terry again strained at his bonds.

"Perro, no, Senor teniente! But no! Mario ees no *perro.* He weel do nothing to so beautiful *senorita—los soldados,* your soldiers, weel do that! In a few meenutes they coom weeth their guns and shoot at targets. You see, Mario has put you and *senorita* behind cactus bush so *soldados* no see!"

IN A blinding flash of comprehension, Terry saw what was intended! The company would march out to the firing points and blaze away at the targets without ever seeing the two captives tied to them, so cleverly were they hidden behind masking cactus!

"Eet is the so brave *teniente* who geev Mario the idea!" said the half-breed. " 'Annytime you want to take the place of one of the targets,' the so brave *teniente* say to Mario. Ha, wan good idea, theenk Mario. Now Mario must go, for pretty soon *soldados* coom and feenish wedding of *senorita* and her *teniente*! *Adios, amigos*! *Valgame con Dios*! Good-by, friends, go with God!" And with that, Mario strode away, beckoning to the small group of waiting Apaches. Before getting out of earshot Mario turned around and cupped his hands.

"May be *los soldados* shoot so bad they do not heet targets or maybe onlee wound *senorita* and *teniente*! Nevair mind, Mario weel be back on hill weeth rifle and feenish thees so fine wedding weeth hees bullets!"

When the full horror of what the half-breed intended came over Terry, he gave way to insane fury, tearing at his bonds and screaming after the departing killer who had devised so fiendish a scheme. It was Toni's quiet voice that brought him back to reason. She calmed him, and for some minutes they talked, saying things that only the hopelessness of their situation gave them courage to utter.

It was sun-up now. At any minute the remorseless military routine would start. Breakfast, water call and police of camp would be over. The troops would line up and be marched out by Chet Burns. Methodically and capably the second lieutenant would carry out his orders—ten rounds per man per target. In a few minutes more some nine hundred bullets, .45 caliber and weigh-

ing nearly three quarters of an ounce apiece, would be whining through the air about the two helpless captives. The range, as Terry well knew, was only six hundred yards to this particular target. It needed only one of those lethal bullets or worse, a ricochet, to end their dreamed-of happiness.

Leaning forward and half kneeling, Terry was in great physical pain. But that was nothing compared to the mental agony that seared his brain as he saw the men in camp turn out, with their rifles and cartridge belts. Brokenly he strove to comfort Toni, but she looked steadily before her, calm and brave.

"After all," she called, "it is a clean, quick way to die, my dearest, together, under a sunny sky and in the outdoors!"

Now the men of the company were winding through the cottonwood that fringed the camp, and the leading files appeared on the road that led to the range. They appeared and disappeared, moving like some elongated serpent until they arrive at last at the outcropping ledge of rock which was the firing point.

"This is the end!" Terry called to Toni, and said farewell brokenly, scarce hearing her soft reply as he watched the men come out from behind the ledge in skirmish order, trailing their rifles.

If only Chet would use his field glasses and see the two figures bound behind the masking cactus, Terry thought, and then realized that the field glasses could not penetrate that solid cover above which only the head of the silhouette targets could be seen.

Terry waited with a kind of gone feeling in the pit of his stomach for the revolver shot that would signal the beginning of the firing.

It came as he waited, sounding, even at that distance, like the crack of doom. He found himself trembling violently, waiting for the inevitable hail of bullets to land. He saw Chet Burns giving orders, saw the firing line almost disappear as the men dropped to the prone position. He closed his eyes, shrinking back against the stake that held him, wondering where the first bullet would land.

Something spat malevolently behind him. He opened his eyes and saw powder smoke rising from the rifles in the firing line and puffs of dust coming up from the blasts of the muzzles. There came to his ears the roll of rapid fire. Something else spatted overhead with the viciousness of a striking rattler.

He looked at Toni. Her chin was lifted unafraid. At the next instant wood was torn from the target on his right and he knew that a ricochet had smashed through. His memory persisted in showing him pictures of richochet wounds—ugly, gaping slashes. He forbore looking at Toni, fearful that her loveliness would be destroyed before his eyes.

There was over him now that feeling of numb paralysis that a deer must feel when seized by the tiger. But it was being slowly borne in upon him that there were a remarkably small number of bullets striking around the target for the number of rounds that had been fired by this time! A wild rush of hope swelled up in him as he realized that more than half of the ammunition for that target had already been expended and that he had heard only three bullets so far!

Instantly alert, he struggled to look around and see if he could figure what the explanation might be. It came to him suddenly, and he thanked God for Chet Burns' error.

CHET had underestimated the range by at least two hundred yards! All the bullets of that skilled group of riflemen were falling in a small cone of dispersion two hundred yards short!

Terry's keen professional instinct overshadowed the fear of death for Toni and himself, for he had discovered

a great musketry principle—that the better the group of marksmen, the smaller will be their cone of dispersion, *i.e.*, the area in which their bullets strike, and that, therefore, the better the marksmanship the more accurate must range estimation be! He was excited about this but not too excited to note thankfully that the firing from the company far below in the valley had ceased. He heaved a great sigh of relief and fixed his eyes on Toni.

Then suddenly a cold chill ran down his back as he remembered Mario and his rifle! Would the half-breed be able to see that his victims were still alive and finish them off as he had promised? Toni had remembered and she, too, was gazing toward the hillside.

At that moment, Terry saw a trooper rise up, to one side of the second targets, and slowly wave an arm back and forth over his head. Chet must have sent one of the men forward to make sure that all was clear around the second set of targets. Already, the company had been swung around into position.

A crackle of rifle fire broke out from the company firing point, and cold sweat broke out on Terry. He jerked his eyes around to that second set of targets, wondering if Chet would range in more accurately this time. But when only a single dust spat rose among the new targets, Terry let out a shout.

"Ye-e-ow!" he yelled. "Chet has *over*-estimated the range this time!"

Evidently Chet had noted that the dust had been kicked up far short of the target, and now had gone to the other extreme in estimating the proper range.

The fire of the entire company was falling in a small cone of dispersion, two hundred yards beyond the second row of targets—smashing with deadly effect into the concealed Mario and his Apaches!

It must have hit them like a thunderbolt, huddled closely as they were behind the screen of cactus. Only three survivors staggered part way up the hill, to fall before they reached the crest. . . .

They found Mario's body, torn and riddled, among them.

Terry lost some of the strain of the last few minutes in examining the holocaust.

"I'm glad we got that fiend," said Chet Burns fervently. "Now we can have a little peace along the Border!"

They were walking back where Toni awaited.

"And he didn't escape to tell the world that the best shooting company in the Army made a clean miss of the targets with nearly two thousand rounds of ammunition!" said Terry morosely.

Chet Burns looked unhappy until Toni interjected a thought that gave them all pleasure.

"But Chet didn't miss the targets!" she said sweetly with a significant look up the hill at that mass of huddled Apache forms.

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THE RANCHER'S REVENGE by Max Brand

There just never has been any better spinner of Western yarns than Max Brand and in this book he is at his best. The story revolves around a two-bit rancher, John Saxon by name, who was humiliated by gunslick Bob Witherell in front of an entire town and made to do a jig to the tune of a six-shooter and then saw the same man steal his cows and burn down his cabin. But Saxon had more steel in his backbone than anyone imagined. He disappeared in the wilderness and he stayed there till he could handle a gun with the speed of light. Then he came back to town, laughed in Witherell's face and killed him in a gun duel. Yet, that shooting only heaped more trouble on Saxon's head for The Solitaire, Witherell's outlaw brother, began a grim vendetta to send Saxon to boothill.

THE RANGER WAY by Eugene Cunningham

Another tophand Western writer, Cunningham has done a colorful, exciting job in this great novel about the Texas Rangers. When Ranger Shelley Raines rode into Pow Wow on the Border he found the bank robbed and the cashier dying and Denver Jones, a hardcase rancher, accused of the crime. Jones had many friends, but even they turned against him when three masked men rescued him from jail and a train hold-up followed during which Jones was recognized. Raines, however, smelled a frame-up and hit the trail to find the real outlaws. And in the showdown Raines demonstrates how tough a Ranger can be when the chips are on the line! Don't miss it!

HIDDEN BLOOD by W. C. Tuttle

Two of the most popular characters in Western fiction, Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens, are back in this dramatic, fast-action tale. This time the saddle pards are headed for Big Medicine Hawksworth's Tumbling H Ranch so that Hashknife can soak his rheumatism in the hot springs. The springs cured Hashknife's pains, but the presence of the two waddies at the Tumbling H plunged them into a feud with the hostile K-10 outfit and sent them on a pasear to Mexico for a gunsmoke fiesta with the oddest bunch of renegades that ever roamed the Border!

DOUBLE CROSS RANCH by Charles Alden Seltzer

Jim Templeton's crew were all set to lynch his new neighbor, John Wetherell, caught stealing some yearlings. when Wetherell's pretty daughter Della arrived to halt proceedings. Then Jim, who had remained hidden in the brush and was unknown to Wetherell, staged a fake rescue and chased his own crew away. The trick won Jim the job as Wetherell's ramrod—which was what he wanted because Wetherell had robbed the estate of Jim's best friend and Jim meant to smash him and recover the money. But Jim's plan was complicated by Della and by Wetherell's trigger-happy crew who had him tagged for a hot-lead welcome to Double Cross Ranch. A memorable saga of the Old West!

"My shot beats his second bullet by the fraction of a second."

SORTIE OUT OF TUCSON

Another great true story from the career of Bat Masterson, famous Western lawman!

by SAM GARDENHIRE

THE first edition of the old *Morning Telegraph* had been put to bed and to us reporters on the paper, the real business of the night was about to begin. Bat Masterson was ready to tell another story of the days when he had been a gun-packing sheriff, and Dodge City, Kansas, had been the wildest cow-town on the old frontier. When Bat talked, nobody interrupted.

Boys, he said, I don't reckon I ever told you about the fracas I had in Dodge, one time, tryin' to keep a bunch of killers from downin' my brother, James. When this happens, I've got through bein' sheriff and have left Dodge City, so I think, for good. And why not?

Most of my friends have wandered away, and the only ties to hold me to the old town are brother Jim, who's managin' the Dance Hall in partnership

with a feller by the name of Peacock, and my friend Luke Short, who's runnin' a faro layout in the Long Branch.

I try to get 'em to go along with me, but they won't listen. "You got yore mines around Tucson," Jim tells me, "but me and Peacock have got our Dance Hall, and it sure looks as if we're goin' to make our pile right here."

Luke is plumb enamored with the breaks he's gettin' at the Long Branch.

So I go to Arizona. Pretty soon Luke Short shows up. He's been run out of town by a bunch of gunmen and one of A. B. Webster's men is dealin' faro in the Long Branch.

That just about burns me up. So I decide to get a few friends together and go back to Dodge on a visit. When Luke and I board the train the next day, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Ben Thompson, Shotgun Collins, Shoot-your-eye-out Jack, Charlie Bassett and some others who are right expert with a Frontier-model Colt, are with us.

When we reach Dodge City, the intruder who's got Luke's faro table at the Long Branch is so eager to pay up for the concession he's usurped, that he shells out cash from every pocket, which is not astonishin', seein' we're all standin' over that tinhorn, fingerin' our six-guns.

We head for the Dance Hall, and I again try to persuade Jim to wind up his affairs with Peacock while I've got this overwhelmin' force of ordnance with me. But Jim is stubborn.

So we spend the rest of the night searchin' for some of these tough gunmen we've been hearin' so much about. But Dodge City is as peaceful as a boardin' school. I feel like apologizin' to the boys.

"Don't worry, Bat," says Doc Holliday. "Those buzzards heard we were on our way and have departed for parts unknown."

The next mornin' we heads back for Arizona, but I've got a hunch trouble is still simmerin' for me. I'd about forgot it, though, a few months later, when a telegram arrives from Great Bend, Kansas.

UPDEGRAFFE AND PEACOCK ARE GOING TO KILL JIM COME AT ONCE—A.

TWO years before this my other brother, Ed—who was town marshal at the time—had been killed while attemptin' to arrest a couple of gun-fighters back in Dodge, and now it looks like it's Jim's turn. What's more I can't call on my friends again for help so soon. I can't expect them to go traipsin' up to Dodge every few weeks to straighten out my personal affairs. I'll have to go it alone and as quick as I can make it too, for a few hours might make a difference between life and death for Jim.

It isn't Peacock I'm worried about so much as Updegraffe, who is Peacock's brother-in-law and a mighty dangerous man with a six-shooter. He'd been workin' as a bodyguard for Mayor Webster, and when he first showed up in Dodge, it was known he'd killed four or five fast gunfighters in even drops.

This Al Updegraffe, I remember, is a lean, tall, broad-shouldered feller, with bushy eyebrows and a long slithery mustache which sort of dribbles down around the corners of his lips. He never wears a tie or coat over his blue woolen Army shirt—just a fancy buckskin vest, decorated with blue-and-white Injun beads and he always keeps his brown pants tucked into his cowboy boots, with the pull-straps hangin' down on the outside. Yep, he even looks like he's a gun sharp.

I no more than finish readin' that telegram than I make a quick run for the train, and get it just as it's pullin' out. I settle down to worry over Jim.

Of course, at this time I don't know how Jim's trouble starts with Peacock and Updegraffe. Mayor Webster shows up in the Dance Hall with Updegraffe, and later Jim learns Peacock has hired Updegraffe as a bartender and bouncer. Jim don't like the remarks Updegraffe makes about me, so Jim fires him. But Updegraffe don't stay fired, and when he's behind the bar again the next day, he pulls a gun and orders Jim out of the place.

Jim is no coward but he's no fool, either, and he knows he can't buck Updegraffe at his own game. And Peacock just laughs and says Jim's headed for Boot Hill unless he pulls out of

town fast. That's how matters stand when the telegram reaches me at the Oriental, at Tucson.

The train is a slow one and it takes me thirty hours to get to Dodge, fumin' and worryin'. When I arrive at dusk, I'm plumb sure Jim is already dead. Before the wheels have stopped rollin', I'm headed away from the depot, bound for the Dance Hall.

All at once a gust of somethin' like wind brushes at my sleeve, and I go for my gun quick. Up ahead of me I see two men. One of 'em is Updegraffe and the other is Peacock. Updegraffe has a smokin' gun in his hand. I shoot just before the second bloom of orange flame blossoms from Updegraffe's Colt. Then Peacock yanks out his gun and starts workin' at me.

As I said, it's Updegraffe I'm really afraid of, so I'm lucky when my shot beats his second bullet by the fraction of a second. He's a man who doesn't miss twice.

I didn't know it then, but my slug ruined his aim. It busts a rib, tears into his chest and rips one of his lungs to shreds. He was dead before he touched the ground.

Peacock is throwin' lead, so I swing the muzzle over and take a shot at him. The bullet hits him above the wrist and comes out just below the elbow. The shock sends him staggerin' back and he drops his pistol. Thinkin' he's just stumbled, I fire again, but he's already fallin', and I miss. But he sure had vitality. He snatches up his six-gun and runs toward the part of the courthouse that's bein' used as a jail.

I start right after him but I can't shoot a fleein' man in the back, so I don't fire. Anyhow, I think he has quit and is tryin' to get away—but he isn't. He's game through and through, and is headin' for his friends who open up on me then from doors and windows.

BULLETS commence to come in my direction thick and fast. The shootin' deepens into a continuous roar, and gun flashes wink and blink at me like fireflies flickerin' up and down the walls. There must have been a dozen men workin' pistols and Winchesters. It's a heap hotter than any situation I've been in before and only a miracle keeps me from bein' hit, with slugs pluckin' at my clothes and the air full of buzzin' whispers.

I stand there, tryin' to make up my mind what to do. I can't stay; retreatin' is just as bad; goin' ahead is certain death. I catch sight of Peacock dodgin' into the doorway of the calaboose, where he takes shelter.

Then I see a two-wheeled cart a little ways off to one side, with its shafts stickin' straight up toward the sky. I jump over fast and kneel down behind the heavy box body of the cart which turns out to be a right good barricade, and again open fire on Peacock, the only one of my enemies there's any chance of knockin' over. He's got the pistol in his left hand now, and he keeps takin' shots at me.

The bullets from the buildings are comin' faster. I can hear them chuggin' into the cart but nothin' comes through. I shoot at Peacock a couple of times but he jerks back and it's just a waste of lead. Then my gun is empty and I have to stop to reload.

As I'm punchin' out empty shells and shovin' in fresh cartridges, a bullet comes at me from a new direction—the back. It cuts through my hat, just missin' the top of my head. I looks around quick, and there's that tinhorn who bought out Luke Short, shootin' at me. I reckon he thought he was mighty clever, creepin' around the back street, tryin' to outflank me.

But he sure was playin' in bad luck. I have another gun planted in the waistband of my pants for emergencies. I whip it out fast and throw one shot at Mr. Tinhorn. I get him plumb in the right eye and he falls dead.

Then I tuck away the spare six-shooter and go on reloadin' my holster gun. I push in six cartridges instead of the usual five. Closin' the gate, I thumb back the hammer and wait for Mr. Peacock to show, because I know well enough if I get him, the fight will be over. There won't be any reason for his friends to continue hostilities.

I wait until he's fired a couple of times—he's as regular as clockwork—while I'm figurin' just when and where I can always expect to see him pop into sight. Then the next time his face appears around the edge of the door, I let him have it.

He lets out one yelp and comes floppin' into plain view. I can tell from the way he falls, that he's all through.

Well, I was right. Peacock's death did end the fight. The shootin' tapers off and I can hear those fellers in the buildings shoutin' back and forth that Peacock is dead. Then silence descends. Pretty soon I take a chance and run toward the places where they've been holed up. Not a bullet comes my way.

I've reached a small *chile con carne* joint, when a door opens and out pops a man with a shotgun. I step up close and give him a good look into the wrong end of my six-shooter. He lets out a squeal and hoists his hands.

"Don't shoot!" he yelps. "I—I'm not in on this." I recognize that voice. It's Mayor Webster.

"What you doin' with that shotgun?" I ask him.

"I—I—" He gives a big gulp. "I was only c-cleanin' it."

It's in my mind to kill him. He knows it, too. I can see him shiverin'.

I snatch the shotgun from his hands, push the release lever and break it open. There are two cartridges in the chamber. I take them out and sniff the breach. All I can smell is oil. The gun hasn't been fired. That saves Webster's life.

I tuck the shotgun under my arm. "What have you fellers done with Jim's body?" I ask.

Webster just stares at me, goggle-eyed. "Jim's body? Why, Jim's alive and well."

I don't believe him. But at that moment I see a feller comin' along the sidewalk. Now that the trouble is over, the lights in nearby buildings are commencin' to come on, and as he passes through a bar of radiance from a saloon, I recognize my brother Jim.

I drop my six-shooter into the holster, run forward and grab him by the hand.

BAT MASTERSON

One of the most renowned of Western pioneers and lawmen, he spent the declining years of his life as a sports writer for the New York Morning Telegraph. It was in the office of that newspaper that he told the startling, exciting tales of his career which are recounted in this series of stories written by Sam Gardenhire, who was one of his fascinated listeners!

"Jim!" I yell. "I thought you were dead."

Jim grins. "Not me," he says. "What are you doin' in Dodge, Bat?"

"I've come after you," I tell him.

"And I'm ready to go, this time," he answers. Then he notices Mayor Webster standin' there. "What's all the shootin' about? I was asleep in my room at Gallon's Hotel and it woke me up, so I came out here to find out what's goin' on."

"I thought you were killed!" I roars. "I came all the way up from Tucson to even up the score. I've been fightin' half the town."

Jim is right surprised. "Bat, I had a row with Peacock, and last night I

sold him my share of the Dance Hall. Then Updegraffe started gunnin' for me, so I got out of sight. I laid low all day, plannin' to catch the late train tonight, and join you at Tucson!"

That sure stumps me. I tell Jim and Webster about the telegram and before I'm finished, Webster interrupts me.

"Wait, Bat," he cries. "Yesterday Peacock gets a telegram from Tucson, warnin' him you are on your way north, all set to down him on sight. That's why he and Updegraffe are waitin'. They're hopin' to get you before you get them." He plucks at my sleeve. "Say, Peacock must have that telegram in his pocket right now. Come over and I'll show you."

We walk to where Peacock is lyin'. Webster stoops over him and then straightens up with the telegram. I've got a block of sulphur matches with me. I tear off one, light it, and he holds up the sheet of paper so I can read it.

MASTERSON HAS JUST LEFT FOR DODGE KILL YOU AND UPDEGRAFFE—A.

* * * * *

Bat Masterson sighed deeply and looked around at the listening reporters.

"That's all there is, boys," he told us. "Jim and I went back to Tucson together. As for those two telegrams, one sent from Great Bend, Kansas, and the other one from Tucson, Arizona, on the same day—I reckon that will always be a mystery to me. Who sent them? Not my friends—because they were meant to start a fight. See if you can figure that out, Gardenhire. I can't."

VIGILANTES OF VIRGINIA CITY

By COLE WEYMOUTH

THERE were two Virginia Cities, one in Montana and one in Nevada, both gold rush towns and both big ones. The Montana strike was made in 1863 by Fearless Bill Fairweather and a party of five.

News of the strike brought thousands of gold hungry miners boiling into Alder Gulch and the town sprang up overnight. Food and supplies—everything the miners needed, had to be freighted in.

Henry Plummer was the sheriff of Virginia City and Plummer combined lawmaking with law-breaking. The big shipments of gold which left Virginia City almost daily were too tempting a prize for him to resist, and the Plummer gang held up gold shipments regularly.

Killings, of course, were commonplace. More than 120 murders are charged to the Plummer gang. The patience of the miners came to an end with the wanton killing of a well liked young Dutchman named Nicholas Tibault and a Vigilante Committee was organized to get rid of Plummer and his outlaws.

A symbol was adopted as the mark of the Vigilantes; this was the series of numbers "3-7-77." The first number was for the three men who organized the Vigilantes, the second their lodge number and the last the number of men present at the hanging of George Ives, Plummer's kill-hungry executioner.

The outlaws thought this business of chalking a number on the house of a man as warning for him to get out was a childish business, but they changed their minds when men who did not get out were promptly captured and hanged. Boot Hill's population boomed and little signs went up to mark the last resting places of many members of the Plummer gang. The rest of the outlaws took heed and departed for parts unknown. Peace came to Virginia City. And then the gold played out.

As rapidly as it had grown, Virginia City declined. It became a ghost town and so it remained for 80 years. But there is talk now of reviving the town and restoring it as a permanent historical site. The Montana Historical Landmarks Society is doing the job with the help of contributions from Montana citizens.

by GUNNISON STEELE

Sometimes Chinook Sam Pelly can be hornswoggled, but he proves that no man can ever fool him twice in the same place!

Chinook Sam stared up at the man with the predatory features

BLIZZARD BLUNDER

INSIDE old "Chinook Sam" Pelly's cabin beside Blackfoot Creek, Sid Leech stood near the window and stared out into the ghostly gray half-light of the blizzard-tortured day. Snow still fell, and it was bitterly cold, with a bleak wind trumpeting down from the higher peaks.

Leech, a huge man with cruel dark features that were bisected by a beak-like nose, kept his little black eyes riveted in a break in the timber fifty yards from the cabin. The dim trail through the thickets by which Chinook Sam would return from the town of Caribou came through that break. And Chinook was due any minute now.

Chinook had made his quarterly trip to Caribou the day before for supplies. He had spent the night there, and early this morning Leech had heard him mention to a crony that he would head out

for Blackfoot Creek at noon so as to get home before dark. That had given Leech his idea.

It was not the first time he had thought about trying to find the wiry oldster's money cache. Sid Leech hadn't been in the Caribou country long. He had come up from Utah after the Law there got too curious about some of his activities. But he had been here long enough to hear the talk about Chinook Sam having a money cache somewhere about his cabin—and Leech wanted it.

Chinook Sam ran a few cattle in summer and trapped in winter. He made money and it didn't take much for him to live, and it was common knowledge that Chinook didn't trust banks. So he must have his money cached somewhere about his place.

So Leech had made his plans, and then headed out through the storm, making certain that he reached the cabin on Blackfoot Creek well ahead of Chinook. As he had expected, he had found the cabin unlocked. He had done what needed to be done, knowing that ordinary methods wouldn't make Chinook reveal where his cache was, and then waited inside the cold cabin.

Leech grimaced, listening to the wolf-like howl of the wind, and shivered. Then suddenly he grunted with eager triumph.

Yonder came old Chinook Sam through the break in the timber! Chinook tramped along on his snowshoes, head lowered, gaunt body braced against the wicked drive of snow and sleet and wind. He came into the narrow clearing and on toward the cabin.

LEECH flattened himself against the wall, but remained where he could see the oldster. Chinook came up to the cabin, limping a little as he always did. His sheepskin was covered with snow and icicles dangled from the whiskers about his mouth. Chinook, Leech thought, would be pretty cold, and eager to get into the cabin and get a fire started.

He saw Chinook unstrap his snowshoes and lean them against the cabin. He saw Chinook limp toward the door. And then, as Chinook reached out to push open the door, there was a wild flurry of snow at the trapper's feet, a snarling, snapping sound, and some monstrous thing seemed to reach up and grab the oldster's leg and fling him violently to the ground.

Watching, Leech saw Chinook roll over and stare with a stunned expression in his eyes at the thing that was clamped about his leg halfway between ankle and knee—a huge bear trap, weighing at least forty pounds, with saw-toothed jaws that would spread a full yard!

Leech flung open the door and stood there grinning down at the trapped man. Chinook looked up, gray-faced, that dazed look still in his eyes, and saw him.

"Who put that devilish thing in front of my door?" he mumbled.

"I did, old man," Leech sneered. "And it caught just what I aimed for it to catch. That trap was made to hold the biggest bear that ever lived. You can't get them jaws open, and the chain is nailed to a stump. Them things will show yuh just where you and me stand."

"But why'd yuh do it?"

"Yuh've got some money cached somewhere close," Leech growled. "I want it!"

Chinook Sam stared up at the man in the doorway, at his dark, predatory features and cruel little eyes, and slow realization seeped into his own bitter eyes.

"So that's it, yuh dirty, yellow carcajou! I know you, Sid Leech! I saw yuh in town, and I heard what folks said about yuh. They said yuh was a two-bit card cheat and a thief!"

"Shut up!" Leech snarled. "Yuh don't seem to know what a jackpot

yuh're in, old man. That grizzly tamer's got yuh, and unless I turn yuh loose yuh'll lay right there and freeze!"

Chinook swiped snow from his eyes with a mittened hand. Sleet cut at his face, and the howling wind drifted snow against him. He knew that a man couldn't live more than an hour huddled there in that wind and snow and sleet.

"No need fumblin' about under that sheepskin," Leech grinned. "Even if yuh managed to shoot me, where'd yuh be then? You'd still be in that trap. Where's the money?"

"What makes yuh think I've got money here?"

"I'll ask the questions—you'll answer 'em, or freeze!"

"What if I tell yuh?"

"Why, then I'd get a crow-bar and prize them jaws open. I'd take the money and leave. Likely yore leg's broke, so I wouldn't be afraid of yuh follerin' me. That seems like a fair swap—yore life for what little money yuh've got cached."

"Yuh—yuh can't let a gent lay here and freeze."

"Can't I? Yuh'll blasted quick find out! Sometime—mebbe in the spring—they'd find yore bones here in front of the cabin. They'd say, 'Poor old devil, he must of been drunk, leavin' a set bear trap here in front of his door where he'd step in it.' And nobody'd know any different."

"Yuh killin' skunk!" Chinook yelled. "I ain't sayin' I've got money here, but if I did have I wouldn't tell you where it is. Before I'd do that I'd lay here and turn to a cake of ice and see yuh roast in purgatory!"

Leech quit grinning. A wicked, feral light blazed in his eyes, and he jerked a gun from his waist-band. Cursing savagely, he leveled the gun at old Chinook Sam. [*Turn page*]

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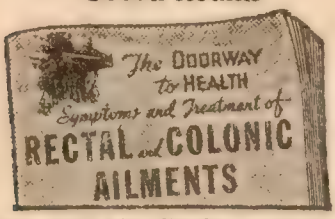

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"Go ahead and shoot," Chinook invited calmly. "I'd rather die that way, quick, than lay here and freeze."

Leech lowered the six-shooter, grinning again.

"Yeah, I reckon yuh would. Yuh've got sand, old rooster. But that won't help yuh when yuh start to freeze. It'll take an hour, mebbe two. What good'll money be to yuh then? I'm givin' yuh yore last chance to tell where that cache is."

Chinook said flatly, "Go to thunder, Sid Leech!"

Leech snarled like a fly-pestered dog.

"All right! I'm goin' back inside now and build up a roarin' fire in the stove. I'll sit there, all snug and warm, and listen to the wind. Case yuh change yore mind, holler out and mebbe I'll hear yuh!"

HE STEPPED back and slammed the door. He went about kindling a fire in the sheet-iron stove, for he himself was cold, meanwhile keeping an ear cocked in the direction of the door. He was confident that the peppery oldster would reveal where his cache was located before lying there and freezing.

The stove crackled and hissed and grew cherry-red with heat, but still there was no sign that Chinook Sam had weakened, despite the fact that he must be becoming numb with cold by now. Snow and sleet pattered against the roof. The wind made a wild, violent sound in the trees and mauled and shoved at the cabin.

Leech scowled blackly. Would Chinook Sam carry out his threat to freeze before telling where his money was hidden?

He heard a sound behind him, and whirled.

The door had slammed inward, and Chinook Sam stood there in the opening, snow swirling about his warped

figure, a long-barreled old six-shooter in his hand. He looked like a ghost with the snow covering his garments and the icicles swaying and gleaming on his scraggly whiskers.

Leech stared in wide-eyed amazement for a moment. Then he spat like a big cat, whirled and leaped for his gun that he had placed on the bunk against the far wall.

Chinook's old gun blazed and roared, and Leech crashed against the floor as if his legs had been chopped from under him.

"Lay there," Chinook barked, "or the next slug'll find yore black heart!"

Leech rolled over, grasping his shattered leg, and stared at the oldster.

"You—I thought—" he stammered.

"Yeah, yuh thought I was layin' out there in that bear trap, freezin', or

[*Turn page*]

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mebbe gettin' ready to tell yuh where my money's hid," Chinook said grimly. "That was yore mistake, Leech."

"But yore leg—it ain't broken?"

"It ain't, for a fact. Just chewed up a little."

With his gun-barrel Chinook tapped his left leg, the one that had been in the trap, below the knee. It gave out a hollow, wooden sound. Then, as Leech stared, Chinook sat down on the bunk, pulled up his pants leg and revealed a leg that was wooden from the knee down.

"Had a little trouble gettin' my peg off out there," the oldster explained. "Then I used it, along with my gun barrel, to pry the trap jaws apart. Nearly froze before I got it back on and got the door open. Yuh wanted to find my money cache pretty bad, didn't yuh, Leech?"

Chinook removed his wooden leg, and from its top he took a cork that revealed a hollow inside the peg. From this hollow he took a wad of tightly-rolled banknotes half as large as his arm and held them up before Leech's astonished eyes.

"There's my cache," Chinook said. "Always keep it with me, so no lobo thief can sneak in and steal it when I'm gone!"

Sid Leech sank back to the floor, in his stunned eyes the knowledge of complete defeat.

"That leg—how'd yuh lose it?" he mumbled.

"Lost it over on the Yellowstone." Chinook Sam chuckled. "Got it caught in a bear trap!"

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By LEW MARTIN

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By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

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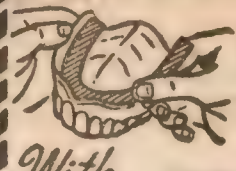

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

who loved Peg and was willing to kill Morgan for her any time. And there was Jewell Clancy whom Morgan loved, but who happened to be the daughter of Broad Clancy—the arch enemy.

The Clancy brood was as wild and arrogant as ever, Morgan was to find, and though they had no legal right on their side, they were perfectly ready to fight and die for what they considered theirs.

All this potential dynamite explodes in Murdo Morgan's face almost the moment he steps into Paradise Valley and makes himself known. And the action, which starts rolling at once, builds up into a thundering tidal wave which bursts in full fury at the climax.

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Mountain Men

Also featured for the issue is THE FUR TRAPPERS, a novelet of the mountain men, by Tom W. Blackburn. Here's some of that "stranger than" history again. It goes back to the early trapping days in the West, when Astor's American Fur Company was swallowing up all the independent trappers and either forcing them to work for the company, or get out.

Mike Menafee, a leader of the independent Rocky Mountain Fur Company was leading a brigade with supplies to a rendezvous with Jim Bridger, when they were stopped by an Astor party. There was another old mountain man in charge of the party of Crow Indians, Beckworth by name. And he had been good friends with Mike Menafee.

"Pains me most as much as it does you, boy," Beckworth said as his Crows silently surrounded the Menafee trappers. "But I got my orders."

"Orders to clean me out?" Menafee asked angrily.

"Yep. We don't want any independent goods crossing South Pass."

In a matter of moments the camp was stripped and the Crows were on their way, with only Beckworth's chuckle floating back to them on the breeze.

But Menafee wasn't licked. There was an Astor trading post on the Poposia and Mike Menafee had a good idea that

was where Beckworth would be taking their packs. On the instant the daring scheme was born in his brain—raid the Astor post and get over the South Pass before Beckworth's Crows knew what had happened.

When Fur Was King

Had Mike Menafee known he was heading into a kind of trouble he didn't expect, it probably wouldn't have stopped him at all, for he was a mountain man and trouble only made him more obstinate. That trip up South Pass gave him plenty of opportunity to be obstinate! THE FUR TRAPPERS is a fine story of the early days when fur was king and the bison, not the longhorn, was lord of the plains.

Don't forget, too, in the coming issue, another Boo-Boo Bounce story, VACATION AND NO MISTAKE, by Ben Frank—another in Bechdolt's fine series of articles, RED BLOOD AND WHITE—a fine short story of the range, BLIZZARD'S END by Francis H. Ames—and many, many more, plus our usual assortment of special features, short subjects and articles containing information and entertainment galore about the West and its way of life. There's *more* between the covers of GIANT WESTERN!

LETTERS FROM READERS

FUNNY thing, we just got through writing about the real West and the fiction West, and here comes a letter from a gal about that very same thing, to wit:

I certainly enjoy GIANT WESTERN, both the true and the fiction stories. One thing I notice about fiction is that heroes in fiction stories are never killed, always come out victorious. In real life, however, some of the finest men never live to see the results of their heroism. Anyway, keep up the good work!—*Mrs. Bess James, Denver, Colo.*

Now there you've put your finger on the main difference between fact and fiction, Bess—uh, Mrs. James. In fiction the heroes seldom die, in real life—well, Boot Hill is jammed with heroes. Maybe there's a moral there. If you want to live to a ripe old age, do all your pistol-packin' in the stories you read!

All the features in GIANT WESTERN appeal to me, but I especially like the BOOK BARGAIN ROUNDUP in which I am tipped

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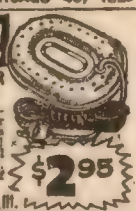

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off to many swell stories. I have followed your leads and believe you me I have had some swell reading in the form of 25c reprint books. Keep on giving out with this information as it sure helps us story-hungry fans. I think you really select the very best yarns of this type that can be gotten.—*Wilbur Hardin, New York City.*

Thanks very much, Mr. Hardin. Glad we tipped you off to the yarns you like. There is another page of book reviews in this very same issue.

Of all the grand yarns you have given us in GIANT WESTERN, my vote goes to WATER, GRASS AND GUNSMOKE by L. P. Holmes. This novel has everything—including a great epic sweep that really makes you realize the wonders of the West. It's a classic. Let's have more like it, won't you?—*Edward J. Marrin, Los Angeles, Cal.*

We're glad you liked that particular story—because it is one of our favorites too. We have received similar reports on the yarn from many other readers—all of whom we thank gratefully. Everybody—remember to write us. A postcard will do as well as a sealed letter. And though we cannot undertake to acknowledge more than a few of the communications in this department, every one of them is carefully read and studied and deeply appreciated. We're always glad to hear from you, and your opinion is welcome whether it's a knock or a boost.

Just address The Editor, GIANT WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N.Y. See you next issue.

—THE RAMROD.

Answers to Questions on Page 149

1. The tribes could not combine against the whites, but fought each other as savagely as they did their white enemies.
2. A northern cowboy ties to the horn, a southern cowboy merely makes a dally around it.
3. The blizzard of 1887 killed more than 80% of the cattle in the Northwest and ruined so many of the big outfits that it brought the era of the open range to an end.
4. No. Many never used a holster. Wild Bill Hickok merely shoved his guns into the waistband of his trousers. Dallas Stoudenmire carried them in his hip pockets.
5. A surrendered outlaw might present his gun, butt first to the sheriff, but keep his finger in the trigger guard. A quick spin and the gun would be reversed, fired, and the officer fall dead.

THE JUMPING-OFF PLACE

Missouri's Pioneer Town

By SAM BRANT

CIVILIZATION ended at St. Joseph, Missouri, in the pioneer days. Here the California wagon trains outfitted for the long haul across the plains. Here the Pony Express began its first relay in a mad dash across the continent. Here, at the meeting of east and west, the pioneer left the known world behind and ventured out into the sea of grass that was as perilous as the uncharted ocean.

It was a fur trader named Joseph Robidoux who first saw the present site of St. Jo. Coming down the Missouri River, he was struck by the beauty of the spot and learned that the Indians called it "The Road to Paradise." Robidoux set up a fur trading post on the site and in 1843 it was named St. Joseph in honor of his Patron Saint.

As a focal point of east-west traffic, it was destined for a turbulent career. In frontier days its career was stormy—here Jesse James was killed and other outlaws left their mark.

But it was as the jumping-off place that St. Jo was most important and so continued, long after the freight wagons had grown into long trains of cars pulled by the Iron Horse.

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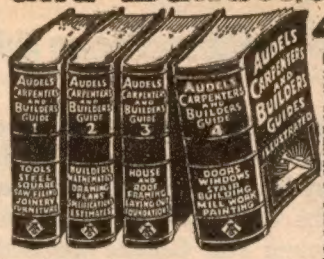

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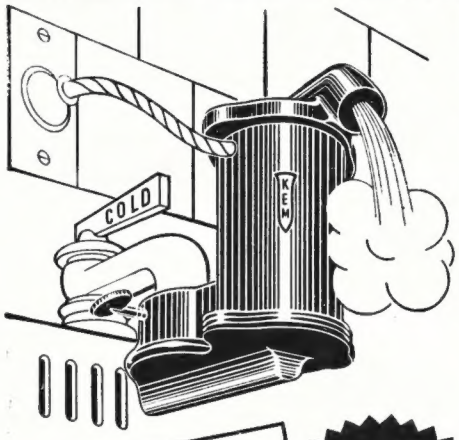

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